

the emotions in early chinese philosophy

CURIE VIRÁG



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CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Virág, Curie, 1970– author.

Title: The emotions in early Chinese philosophy / Curie Virág.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016039462 | ISBN 9780190498818 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Emotions (Philosophy) | Philosophy, Chinese—To 221 B.C.

Classification: LCC B127.E46 V57 2017 | DDC 128/.370931—dc23 LC record
available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016039462>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

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Preface

A famously enigmatic passage in the *Huainanzi* (c. 130 BCE) explains that when the legendary figure Cangjie 倉頡, with his two sets of eyes, first invented writing, “Heaven rained millet and the demons wailed at night.”¹ What writing has to do with showers of millet and howling demons has been the source of much perplexity, but scholars have settled into the idea of the talismanic function of writing as a means of exerting control over the phenomenal world—including the world of demons.² Whatever the truth of this particular passage may be, it dramatizes a more general observation about the workings of language and of naming in general: that the inscribing of a word, or the coming into currency of a term or idea, may not so much indicate a new awareness of its existence, as signal an endeavor to tame, order, and comprehend it in new ways.

If we consider the emotions as “demons” of a sort—as forces in the world that are not entirely within human control or understanding, but that are nevertheless real—then the naming of these particular demons may represent a similar gesture to give them order and form by placing them within the domain of human comprehension. Many names have emerged to give shape to this realm of experience since Warring States thinkers began to theorize about it, but perhaps none so revealing as the new collective category of *qing* 情—a term that corresponds, at least structurally, to what we have come to recognize as emotions, passions, or feelings.

As far as we can gather from the surviving texts, it was around the fourth century BCE that the realm of emotions came into view as a focus of major philosophical interest, and that the term *qing*—which originally referred to the condition of things in the world—came to acquire a distinct psychophysical and

1. William Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1994), 132. *Huainanzi* Ch. 8, *Sibu Congkan* 21/8/4.11.

2. Catherine Despeux, “Talismans and Sacred Diagrams,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 529.

human focus. Over the course of the Warring States period (c. 475 BCE–221 CE), thinkers proposed diverse theories about the nature of emotions and their proper role in moral life. But out of a wide range of possibilities there eventually emerged a mainstream account, canonized during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), that was united by the assumption that emotions and desires—despite the dangers they posed—were also a force of coherence and unity, that they gave access to true understanding of the world, and that they furnished a basis for cognitive and moral agency. Such an emphasis on the normative potential of human emotions would eventually become recognized as a defining feature of traditional Chinese thought and culture.

This historical trajectory, especially as considered from a comparative context, raises a host of questions: How did the mainstream account of emotions become mainstream, and why did it come to possess such authority? How, conceptually, did *qing*—which had previously referred to the condition of things in the world—come to refer to something like what we might call “emotions,” which seem to represent the realm of subjective human experience? Moreover, why did emotions become a focus of debate in the first place? Why did thinkers theorize about the emotions, and what did they think would be accomplished by such theorization? What was at stake in this enterprise?

Given these multiple levels of concerns, I have engaged in a rather different sort of scholarly undertaking from what has been pursued by most scholars who have studied the problem of emotions in early Chinese philosophy. Much of the scholarship on this topic has been concerned centrally with the issue of how the early philosophers evaluated the emotions. This has often led to the conclusion that a given thinker either rejected or condoned them, or both, leading then to a need to resolve the apparent contradiction of such a position. I have not been persuaded that it is productive to take on the issue of ethical evaluation without first examining what it is we are speaking about when we invoke the concept of emotions. My conclusion has been that the early mainstream thinkers conceptualized the realm of emotions in quite an expansive way, and that, while recognizing that they could interfere with the pursuit of virtue, distort our perceptions, and harm our peace of mind, they also envisioned another level at which they could represent the inherent, patterned reality of human beings, and thus required proper fulfillment. In view of this, to observe that a given philosopher thinks that the emotions are good or bad, normative or deviant, does not get us very far. Before undertaking this level of inquiry, it is necessary to confront other, more fundamental questions: What were the emotions, phenomenally speaking? Why was the topic so important for early thinkers? And what forces shaped the trajectory of development in thinking about the emotions?

One way to investigate such questions without losing sight of the ideas themselves is to interrogate the conceptual paradigms, assumptions, and logic upon which these ideas were articulated—in other words, to investigate those realms

of thought that, as Geoffrey Lloyd has aptly described, were “not a formally elaborated part of any natural philosopher’s theory, but rather a common and deeply ingrained way of thinking and talking about the world.”³ Such an interest is what led to a concern in this study with the “naturalism” of early thinking about emotions—a term that I understand not simply as a metaphor or analogy meant to illustrate or justify theories of emotion, but as a way of understanding and making sense of how the world works. The juxtaposition of inquiry into emotions and “reality” thus reflects a convergence that is not only conceptual but also historical: that is, the mainstream account of emotions as both intelligent and intelligible, and as furnishing a standard of human fulfillment, went hand in hand with an emergent naturalistic conception of things in the world as characterized by distinct inclinations and patterns. Like the cosmos itself, which was coming into view during this period as a coherent realm that functioned according to cyclical, patterned processes, human emotions came to be similarly recognized as embodying the patterned workings of human beings.

Recognizing the way in which the inquiry into human emotions in early China was bound up with the endeavor to achieve true and objective knowledge of the world, and was thus part of a more general naturalistic intellectual orientation, provides a way to resolve a number of long-standing interpretive puzzles involving the conception of emotions in the mainstream texts, and to challenge some persistent and untenable categorical divisions that are often invoked in the study of Chinese philosophy more generally. A naturalistic approach offers a plausible way to make sense of the apparently contradictory assessments of emotions in all the mainstream texts without resorting to the idea that these thinkers were fundamentally conflicted about the emotions, held irreconcilable views about them, or were ambivalent. More basically, it undercuts the validity of certain dichotomies—largely Western and modern—with which emotions have been approached by scholars of Chinese philosophy. It thus shows that conceptual oppositions such as subjective versus objective, emotion versus reason, and thinking versus feeling cannot, in their conventional formulations, properly be applied to the study of the early mainstream thinkers, because they force the entire discussion of the emotions into a choice between two problematic positions: that emotions are irrational and subjective, and thus fundamentally distinct from cognitive and rational processes, or else that all thought and judgment are to be subsumed under the realm of emotions.

One of the difficulties I encountered in writing this book was that I found myself continually plunging into topics, sources, methods, and disciplines that I did not necessarily feel equipped to deal with. To a certain extent, this speaks to the sheer complexity and vastness of the topic at hand. But it also reflects the

3. Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, “Greek Antiquity: The Invention of Nature,” in *The Concept of Nature. The Herbert Spencer Lectures*, ed. John Torrance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 11.

somewhat Zhuangzian, “wandering” path that led me to write a book on emotions in early Chinese thought. This book is the result of an unexpected detour that began with the idea—extremely naïve, in retrospect—of including one “introductory” chapter about the early thinkers in a book that was to be otherwise devoted to conceptions of emotions in the late Six Dynasties to the Southern Song periods (roughly the sixth–twelfth centuries). Since the latter had been the topic of my dissertation, I was expecting things to move along fairly quickly. But as I began to work through these early texts, I quickly came to realize that these early thinkers had even more to say on this topic than I had expected, and that the issue was far more complex than I had ever imagined. To make a reasonable attempt to make sense of their ideas—as opposed to collecting a few supposedly representative passages on *qing* for each of the major thinkers and then moving on—was not a task to be wrapped up in a few months. As I continued with the project, torn between the desire to linger and explore and the pressure to write up my quick synthesis and move on, one chapter grew into two, and then to three. Eventually the whole project as I had originally conceived it became untenable. I needed to write another book.

Even with an entire book, there is much that cannot be covered. I have not provided a comprehensive survey of the wide range of possibilities of thinking about emotions in early China. Nor have I, in the context of any given thinker, provided an exhaustive account that covers all relevant discussions of the topic. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the thinkers of the mainstream tradition, and in particular, a certain shared orientation and logic exhibited in the mainstream texts, even while each is distinguished by its own set of concerns and values. But what I have compromised in terms of exhaustiveness of textual and topical coverage I hope I have made up for in other ways. I have not pursued a history of ideas here, but have sought to explore issues of a more general relevance pertaining to what the shifting discourse of emotions has meant in the evolution of thought and values in early China. Motivated by a broader historical interest, I have highlighted the convergences in thinking about emotions, cognition, and subjectivity, and sought to situate developments in these domains within the larger unfolding of thinking about ethics, politics, and the natural world. I have not pursued much by way of cross-cultural or comparative explorations, but the kind of approach I have taken here could presumably be the starting point for productive comparative investigations of shifting values and conceptions of emotions across cultures.

Other kinds of wandering have also led me to the topic of this book, and these have been of a more personal nature. I have long been fascinated with how people in the past might have thought about, and experienced, the emotions differently, and how these ways of thinking and feeling might have evolved over time. I suppose if I were to dig further into my psyche for an explanation, I would probably find a number of contributing factors having to do with my experience

living in multiple cultures, which required me to navigate in worlds with different emotional norms and value systems. However, it is not clear that any of this experience would have surfaced in my historicizing consciousness had I not read, early on in my academic formation, Norbert Elias's *Civilizing Process*, which alerted me to the possibility that aspects of ourselves that seem to be so unthinking and immediate, like our feelings of shame and disgust, might bear the imprint of structural forces far larger than anything we could envision from the ground, in our immediate world of personal interactions. The work of Elias, along with a number of other seminal writings I read while studying medieval and early modern cultural history at Berkeley, very much solidified my interest in tracing the genealogies of ideas, values, and norms. And although I eventually shifted my attention from Europe to China, the questions that had captivated me all along accompanied me like good old friends—or perhaps like desperate demons awaiting their fate.

Finally, this book has been long in the making, and the path I have taken to bring it to completion has itself been the ultimate act of wandering, but it is hoped that it was all to a good end. I began working on the book during my first post-PhD research leave, which I spent in Budapest as a fellow at the Collegium Budapest when it was in its final year. The year I spent there, working in the inspiring atmosphere of the beautiful eighteen-century building in the Castle District that housed the institute, and conversing and sharing meals daily with colleagues who were expert in fields far removed from my own, had a deep impact on me, both personally and intellectually. My experience there encouraged me to think more broadly about my research and to see connections with other realms of inquiry—including the sciences. I am grateful to Daniel Brooks, Éva Gonczi, Gábor Klaniczay, Piroska Nagy, Xavier Barral i Altet, Zsuzsa Hetényi, and all the other fellows and staff at the former Collegium, for many inspiring conversations and for their warm and enthusiastic support of my work.

I would also like to thank colleagues and staff at Central European University (CEU), where I spent two memorable years (2013–2015) as a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study and as Visiting Faculty in the Departments of Philosophy and Medieval Studies. The support I received at CEU, the excellent lectures and seminars I attended, and stimulating conversations with colleagues and students have significantly shaped this book. At the IAS I would like to thank Éva Fodor, again Éva Gonczi, my amazing office-mates Zsolt Csiganyik and Duane Corpis, and all the fellows from both years of my stay, who taught me a great many things and expanded my intellectual world. I am grateful to the wonderful colleagues in the Department of Philosophy, who took an interest in my work, attended my too-numerous talks, and provided much-appreciated support and friendship: Hanoch Ben-Yami, Gábor Betegh, István Bodnár, Emma Bullock, Katalin Farkas, Philip Goff, Mike Griffin, Ferenc Huoranszki, Maria Kronfeldner, Simon

Rippon, Howard Robinson, and David Weberman. I would also like to thank colleagues in the Medieval Studies Department—Katalin Szende, Daniel Ziemann, Alice Choyke, and many others—who welcomed me since the day I arrived at CEU and made me feel right at home. Niels Gaul, now in Edinburgh, has been an excellent co-conspirator and collaborator in emotions-related historical projects. Finally, special thanks to the CEU Humanities Initiative, under the direction of Katalin Farkas and László Kontler, which supported my IAS fellowship in the first year, funded a workshop that I organized, and provided me with a further grant to carry on new projects that have developed out of this book.

I am much indebted to my teachers and friends from Harvard, particularly my former advisor, Peter Bol, who inspired me to study China in the first place, and Michael Puett, who first taught me about early Chinese philosophy. I thank also my colleagues at the University of Toronto for many years of warm support—Jotaro Arimori, Eric Cazdyn, Linda Feng, Amanda Goodman, Ken Kawashima, Tom Keirstead, Kyoungrok Ko, Ikuko Komuro-Lee, Johanna Liu, Yue Meng, Janet Poole, Hsiao-wei Rupperecht, Atsuko Sakaki, Graham Sanders, Andre Schmid, Vincent Shen, Yiching Wu, and Lisa Yoneyama.

I would also like to thank those colleagues who read and gave valuable feedback on portions of my work at various stages of this project—Gábor Betegh, Erica Brindley, Piroska Nagy, Christian de Pee, Eric Hutton, Michael Puett, and anonymous reviewers at Oxford University Press and the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Their comments, suggestions, and criticisms helped me improve my book. I am much indebted to Ryan Balot, who played a major role in getting this project moving, and imparted valuable advice in the early stages of writing. The editors at Oxford University Press have been supportive of this project from the beginning, and I thank them for their patience as my book underwent several dramatic re-incarnations before achieving its final form.

My family in California and in Hungary, and friends scattered across several continents, have supported me a great deal over the years, both with their encouragement and with their generous help in many practical aspects of life. During the final stretch of book-writing, my friends Jennifer Bell and Andreas Katsouris, Maureen McKay, and Magdolna Szabó Baloghne showered me with many kindnesses and helped me see the project to completion, but also to escape from it as needed.

My children have accompanied me on this long journey, and during the years that I have been occupied with writing this book, I watched in awe as they grew into strong, confident, sensitive individuals, each busy with projects of their own. Adrienn, wise beyond her years, invariably dispensed good advice, and was always ready to converse with me about the big questions of life, science, and religion. Ilona kept us all sane as she quietly, and without fanfare, went about accomplishing amazing things with her usual determination and focus.

Sebastian, my youngest, despite dwelling most of the time in a parallel universe of structure and form, bread-baking and music, somehow remembered to check in with me regularly about the progress of my book, and to ask when it would finally be finished. This little trio has been the greatest inspiration in my life and I dedicate this book to them.

Introduction

During the Warring States period (c. 475 BCE–221 CE) in China, the emotions became a focal point of intense philosophical debate. Early thinkers espoused wide-ranging views about the nature of emotions and their proper role in moral life. Some argued that they were passive, involuntary responses to things in the world, while others claimed that they were active forms of personal engagement. Some insisted that they were amoral and needed to be shaped in accordance with proper norms, while others regarded them as the basis for moral intuitions and the source of genuine values. Out of such diverse possibilities a certain orientation toward these issues came to be adopted—namely, that despite their tendency to go awry, emotions and desires functioned according to the patterns and workings of the natural world, and that their fulfillment was a necessary feature of the fully realized human existence. They were a crucial part of proper and intelligent engagement with the world, and they formed an important basis of cognitive and practical agency.

How, why, and with what significance such views became authoritative are the basic questions that drive this book. Focusing on those thinkers who would constitute the mainstream philosophical tradition—Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi—as well as one thinker, Mozi, who did not, I examine how a particular shared orientation emerged and developed to form what would be known as the “traditional” Chinese perspective. The goal of this study is not just to trace evolving conceptions of emotions in early Chinese philosophy but also to interrogate the role of emotions in the very inception of an ethical tradition in China. My argument is that the mainstream account of emotions as both intelligent and intelligible, and as furnishing a standard of human fulfillment, went hand in hand with an emergent naturalistic conception of things in the world as characterized by distinct inclinations and patterns. By virtue of its potential to link inner and outer realities, our emotional disposition—whose workings were now intelligible—could furnish the grounds for claiming that moral agency resided in the self, and that we had direct access to true knowledge and values.

The idea that emotions are ethically significant and have positive connotations has been gaining currency in recent scholarship on early China, particularly during the past decade. However, the exploration of this vitally important

topic has been hampered by the persistence of a set of conceptual dichotomies that are ripe for reevaluation. These dichotomies have been much challenged in contemporary philosophy of emotions and cognitive science,¹ but have persisted in Sinological scholarship. They include, most notably, those of emotion versus reason (or feeling versus thinking), practice versus theory, body versus mind, and subjectivity versus objectivity.

A longstanding assumption in the study of China more generally has been that “traditional” Chinese thinkers did not fully distinguish between emotion and cognition, and that both functions were the domain of a single faculty—the mind/heart (*xin* 心). Early Chinese philosophers, accordingly, regarded the cognitive and emotive faculties as part of a fully integrated whole. One version of this admittedly appealing view has been the rather startling conclusion that emotions are *indistinguishable* from what one might, in the “West,” refer to as “thinking” or “reasoning.” Since, the argument goes, knowledge in China has been traditionally conceived in the context of practical concerns, social interaction, and self-realization, it cannot have been directed toward some kind of “objective” understanding of the world. After all, didn’t we all know that there was no metaphysics in China, and therefore no concern with “truth” as such?

Many versions of this basic reading have been posited by various scholars in their studies of particular early philosophers. One of the most active proponents of such an approach has been Roger T. Ames, who along with David Hall, has written extensively on the nature of thinking in early China. In the context of Confucius’s thought, for instance, Ames and Hall have proposed that

[T]hinking for Confucius is not to be understood as a process of abstract reasoning, but is fundamentally *performative* in that it is an activity whose immediate consequence is the achievement of a practical result. Far from a means of lifting oneself out of the world of experience, thinking for Confucius is fundamentally integrative, a profoundly concrete activity which seeks to maximize the potential of the existing possibilities and the contributing conditions. Thus, in place of any activity that merely assess an objective set of facts and/or values, thinking for Confucius is *actualizing* or *realizing* the meaningfulness of the world.²

Although I would agree with some of the observations made here about what thinking represents for Confucius, the polarization of forms of thinking

1. The idea of a separation of reason and emotion continues to be undermined by current neuro-scientific studies, which have shown the difficulties of extricating emotions from cognitive processes. The pioneering study of this is Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994). For a recent study that focuses on the integration of emotive and cognitive-perceptual processes in the brain, see Luiz Pessoa, *The Cognitive-Emotional Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

2. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 44; italics in original.

into the opposing camps of immanent versus transcendent, performative versus abstract, integrative versus objective, and so on, introduces what I think are invalid distinctions. Such observations accord with the general idea that thinking and feeling—and effectively, what is right and what one wants—are virtually indistinguishable for many early Chinese philosophers. As James Behuniak has asserted in the context of Mencius: “Mencius subordinates any morality based on doctrines (*yan* 言) that stipulate what is appropriate and advocates in their place a morality based on the spontaneous prompts of feeling (*xin* 心).”³ Ultimately, the implication is that early Chinese thinkers did not recognize a genuine distinction between “objective” reality and “subjective” experience.

Such characterizations have been challenged by scholars who have stressed the importance of “cognitive” or “rational” considerations for early Chinese philosophers, and indeed, have noted even a tendency toward “dualistic” forms of thinking. Edward Slingerland, following the approach of David Nivison, has observed that the “holist” reading of Chinese thinking is rooted in a longstanding European interest in reading into the Chinese past a harmony of reason and emotion that was perceived to have been lacking (or lost) in the European tradition.⁴ Although such a critical perspective has been extremely valuable in highlighting the role of more “reasoned” or “cognitive” considerations among early Chinese thinkers, it has also tended to reaffirm the sense of an opposition between reason and emotion.

The approach I opt for here is to step out of such dualistic categories altogether, while building on the many insights of scholars who have deployed them in their readings. My strategy for doing so will be to consider early philosophical discussions of emotions within a broader context of the evolving conceptions of the self and the human, and their links to emergent perspectives on the natural world. The rationale for this approach is my sense that the meaning and historical significance of early debates over emotions, and the eventual formation of an authoritative mainstream approach to emotions, can only be properly understood in view of the establishment of a certain naturalistic picture of the world. The problem that has occupied most scholars who have confronted the issue of

3. James Behuniak Jr., *Mencius on Becoming Human* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 12.

4. For Slingerland’s survey and critique of the “holist” reading and proposed “weak dualist” approach, see his “Body and Mind in Early China: An Integrated Humanities-Science Approach,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013): 6–55. Slingerland’s emphasis on the distinct cognitivist and emotivist strands in the thought of early mainstream philosophers is a prominent feature of his study *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The “two-root” model of moral motivation that Slingerland develops is based on the approach of David Nivison, “Two Roots or One?” and other essays on Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, and Xunzi, in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. David S. Nivison and Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996). My review of the holism vs. dualism controversy, and alternative proposal for how to reconcile the apparent tensions between “emotions” and “reason” in the early Chinese philosophy, appears in Curie Virág, “The Intelligence of Emotions? Debates over the Structure of Moral Life in Early China,” *L’Atelier du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, <http://acrh.revues.org/6721>.

emotions in early Chinese thought—namely, the normative status of emotions and desires—is thus, in my view, secondary to the problem of what the emotions *were*—as phenomena in the world. This is a question to which all the mainstream thinkers proposed a complex answer: one that recognized the multivalence of emotions, and thus their potential for deviance and harm, as well as their crucial importance in the properly realized human life.

The mainstream vision of emotions, as I will elaborate in this book, was that it represented the characteristic patterns or dispositions within human beings, giving genuine access to the workings of the world. This was part and parcel of an emergent naturalistic vision that regarded the cosmos itself as a coherent, intelligible realm characterized by certain patterns and dispositions. When the mainstream thinkers argued that human emotions—*qing* 情—represented the characteristic inclinations of human beings, they were already taking for granted that nature itself functioned in certain intelligible ways. In forwarding such a claim, they were not making a category mistake, conflating inner and outer, subjective and objective, feeling with thinking. Instead, they were arguing that human beings possessed the capacity to optimize and fulfill themselves so as to be in alignment with the workings of the cosmos.⁵

Fundamental to this idea was the belief that humans had access to knowledge of *how things are*. Emotion and cognition were integrated to the extent that the optimal realization of one's human potential required emotional fulfillment and accordance with right understanding of how things properly should be. Moreover, as fully realized, emotions were not just subjective, irrational impulses that had nothing to do with the conditions of the external world or with the project of properly grasping this world. Emotions could also be sources of true understanding of the world. Such understanding, to be sure, was not a quest for "metaphysical truth," but it was, in a basic way, objective in the sense that it was directed toward the attainment of knowledge of the world and its properties. The story of the emotions in early China is, thus, a story of how a certain tradition of thinking about emotions could affirm the cognitive and ethical agency of the self without relinquishing the full range of perceptual powers at one's disposal—powers that engaged our emotional intuitions and dispositions, as well as our reasoning capacities.

5. I use the term "cosmos" in the quite broad sense as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which has, as its first definition, "The world or universe as an ordered and harmonious system," and which thus points to a conception of the world as a unified, intelligible whole; *OED* Online, www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/42251?redirectedFrom=cosmology. I do not assume by this term, as is standard among historians of Chinese science, a theory of cosmic correlations, whereby the realms of the human, political, astronomical, and so on are linked in a web of causal relationships. Such a conception is a formulation that emerged in certain historical contexts, most notably, the late Warring States and Han periods. As I shall argue here, there were significant cosmological theories predating the late Warring States period, which assumed that the universe operated according to certain distinct and knowable patterns and tendencies. More will be said on this issue in the section "Competing Naturalisms and Models of the Self," where I invoke the term "nature" in a way that is interchangeable with "cosmology."

WRITING THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS IN CHINA

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in emotions as an important historical problem in its own right. In part, this is due to the larger wave of scholarly interest in emotions that has pervaded all disciplines and that has been gaining momentum in the past several decades. The result has not only been an outpouring of studies on emotion-related topics but also a “rehabilitation” of emotions in the popular imagination: emotions, as it turns out, are not such a bad thing after all, and the ancients didn’t think so, either.⁶ Much of this is resonant with developments in the philosophy of emotions over the past half century or so, in which philosophers have been at pains to emphasize that emotions are not at odds with reason and cognition, but work in tandem with them. This view has been most closely connected with the cognitivist account of emotions championed by Robert Solomon and others, which has stressed that emotions involve processes normally attributed to thinking, reasoning, judging, and evaluating, and are therefore not in basic tension with the intellect. This approach has become more or less mainstream.⁷

This pattern can be seen in Sinological scholarship as well, where there has been a dramatic reversal in evaluations of “traditional” approaches to emotions. The emotions have long been a popular topic for scholars working on late Ming and Qing Dynasty (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE) literature—the themes of love, passion, and sexual desire having been ubiquitous in the flourishing vernacular culture of the time. But in part because of the negative evaluations of “traditional” morality, as popularized by Ming-Qing authors, it has been long taken for granted that earlier intellectual traditions denied and suppressed natural feelings and desires in the name of conformity to strict codes of behavior (in the case of the Confucian tradition) or of achieving equanimity and detachment (in the case of the Daoist and Buddhist traditions).⁸ After over a century of bad press, scholars of early Chinese philosophy and religion have been at pains to correct such misreadings, emphasizing that few pre-modern thinkers

6. Thomas Dixon traces the history and significance of this emotions “rehabilitation project” in *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

7. See, e.g., Robert C. Solomon, *Not Passion’s Slave: Emotions and Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Other philosophers who have stressed the cognitive and evaluative dimensions of emotions include Robert Gordon, William Lyons, Jerome Neu, Ronald de Sousa, and Michael Stocker. Applying similar categories in the analysis of ancient Stoic texts, Martha Nussbaum has defended the view that emotions are cognitions, *tout court*, but that this is a realm that involves a broad range of activities, including perception, desire, evaluation, and judgment; see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

8. Much of the scholarship has focused on the so-called cult of *qing* that began in the late Ming period. This is itself a fascinating development that speaks to the particularities of late Ming thought and cultural life. On this, see Anthony Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers. Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

categorically rejected the emotions and desires as problematic, or claimed that they were incompatible with the moral life.

In the context of early Chinese philosophy, the focus of the first major scholarly discussions about emotions in English was the concept of *qing*. *Qing* is a particularly intriguing term because, as mentioned earlier, it came to possess a remarkable multivalence that straddled the ontological divide between what we normally recognize as “subjective” and “objective” realities. Prior to the fourth century BCE, *qing* referred to the objective condition of the world—to “circumstances,” “essential reality,” or “situation.” From the fourth century onward, the term came to acquire its distinct emotional sense, and began to be invoked in taxonomies of basic human feelings, which were conceived variously as four, six, or seven, and encompassed some combination of the feelings of joy (*xi* 喜), anger (*nu* 怒), sadness (*ai* 哀), delight/pleasure (*le* 樂), fear (*ju* 懼), love (*ai* 愛), dislike (*wu* 惡), and desire (*yu* 欲). The emotive sense of *qing* did not displace the previous sense of *qing* as “how things are”; instead, the term achieved an expanded range that bridged the gap between reality, in a more descriptive sense, and feeling as experienced.⁹

Much of the Sinological literature on *qing* has been devoted to making sense of when and how a naturalistic term referring to the reality of things came to refer to passions and feelings. In an article that sparked much scholarly discussion, A. C. Graham sought to trace the origins of the emotive sense of *qing*, and argued that this meaning did not emerge until Han times.¹⁰ After considerable debate on this issue among a number of scholars, Christoph Harbsmeier and Michael Puett argued persuasively that the term *qing* possessed a wide semantic range before the Han period, and already encompassed the realm of emotions and desires. In Puett’s reading, this broad semantic range is significant in the way that it demonstrates the presence of competing accounts of *qing* for various ends, even in the thought of one thinker. The semantic range, then, could demonstrate an ambivalence vis-à-vis the emotions—an espousing of two basically different positions with respect to the emotions, each meant to

9. Christoph Harbsmeier identifies seven distinct (if often overlapping) basic categories of meanings in early Chinese usage: (1) factual: the basic facts of a matter; (2) metaphysical: underlying and basic dynamic factors; (3) political: basic popular sentiments/responses; (4) anthropological: general basic instincts/propensities; (5) positive: essential sensibilities and sentiments, viewed as commendable; (6) personal: basic motivation/attitude; and (7) emotional: personal deep convictions, responses, feelings. I would hesitate to so clearly define (3), (4), (5), and (6) outside the realm of emotional experience, as popular sentiment and personal judgment involve a strongly affective component. But as Harbsmeier himself admits, the differences between these categories are overstated in his study for the sake of pointing out important distinctions. See “The Semantics of *Qing* in Pre-Buddhist Chinese,” in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Halvor Eifring (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 69–148.

10. A. C. Graham, “The Meaning of *Ch’ing* [Qing],” in “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* 9 (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), 59–65. The implicit narrative in Graham’s reading is a progression toward greater awareness of subjectivity. I shall resist any such teleology moving toward modern subjectivity in this study.

justify a different conclusion that was important for Xunzi's ethical and political theory.¹¹

Puett's emphasis on the coexistence of multiple meanings of *qing* raises an important issue that has occupied much recent scholarship on the conception of emotions in early China, and that also lies at the heart of my study—namely, what to do with the apparently conflicting assessments of emotions in a single text? For, indeed, it is a striking fact that, in all the mainstream philosophical texts, from the writings of Xunzi, with its strongly worded injunctions to control and suppress the emotions and desires, to the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, with their ascetic tendencies—we find, at once, passages that seem to call for the suppression or control of emotions, and passages that validate them as guides for proper living. The problem of reconciling these apparently conflicting evaluations of emotions has been a central priority in the scholarly literature on emotion.

Methodologically, resolving these contradictions involves taking a rather broad approach to the problem of emotions—one that is not limited to a particular Chinese concept or idea. I shall not, therefore, pursue a history of *qing* or of any other specific term deemed to be the Chinese equivalent of what we might refer to as “emotions” in English. Instead, I will deploy the term “emotions” as my general category of reference. By this I refer to an entire spectrum of interrelated phenomena, from involuntary, physiological responses to external stimuli, to basic human dispositions and inclinations, to forms of cognition and perceptions of meaning, and to judgments and evaluations. In maintaining an expansive conception of emotions that can encompass quite diverse accounts of what the emotions are, I am not simply acknowledging the obvious fact of their complexity and multivalence. A more substantial point is that the topic of my inquiry is not what the emotions *are* per se, but what people understood them to be. Early Chinese debates over emotions were as much about the quality, depth, and scope of the experience they represented, as they were about how to evaluate them morally. One of the basic concerns of this study is, thus, precisely to show that what we conceive as “emotions” was a site of tremendous controversy in early China, and that the divisiveness of the issue was due, in large part, to the fact that it could be defined in so many ways and approached at so many levels. That it sustained such a variety of interpretations was because so much hinged on one's definition of it.

One might reasonably object that it is incongruous to apply this decidedly modern and foreign term to discuss facets of Chinese thought that are so deeply rooted in their specific conceptual and historical context. Indeed, this particular term is arguably more objectionable than a term such as “feelings” or “passions,”

11. See Harbsmeier, “Semantics of *Qing*,” and Michael Puett, “The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *Qing* in Early Chinese,” in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Halvor Eifring (London: Brill, 2004), 37–68.

in that the term “emotions” was coined in the nineteenth century by natural scientists seeking to promote their own materialist account of affective life.¹² However, the term “emotions” is the one in currency, and the rich body of scholarship surrounding this topic pertains to the many aspects of human life and experience that I am interested in addressing in this study. This makes it optimal for my purposes, which take as a given that emotions could be conceptualized in fundamentally different ways, and subject to extremely diverging evaluations. There is, moreover, the added methodological value of using a “foreign” term, which is that it enables one to launch an investigation into an entire spectrum of relevant terms and ideas in the Chinese philosophical tradition, and thus frees us from the constraints of a single Chinese term.

Since my concern is not to follow the career of a particular emotions term, but to trace the very ways in which certain realms of experience that we would associate with the emotions are subject to shifting conceptualizations and linguistic formulations, it is important to cast one’s net broadly so as to take into account the many levels of reality that we are dealing with. At the same time, it is only when we confront the full range of possibilities for conceptualizing the emotions that we can appreciate the particularity of the tradition of thought that would become mainstream, and that would acquire the force of normativity in imperial China. Thus, considered as one among a diverse range of possible approaches, the mainstream account of emotions as comprising the underlying, patterned constitution of human beings comes into view as the product of a contingent history—one in which conceptions of the human are continually debated and subject to reevaluation.

Terminologically speaking, I shall consider a rather expansive vocabulary of terms that includes not only *qing* 情, but also various particular emotions, such as *xi* 喜 (joy), *nu* 怒 (anger), *ai* 哀 (sadness), *le* 樂 (delight/pleasure), *you* 憂 (sorrow), *bei* 悲 (grief), *ju* 懼 (fear), and *ai* 愛 (love). I will also examine terms of preference such as *hao* 好 (liking) and *wu* 惡 (disliking), as well as motivational states such as *yu* 欲 (desire) and *zhi* 志 (intention, focused inclination). Beyond references to emotions, emotive states, and so on, I shall also be concerned with verbs of cognition such as *si* 思 (to think) and *lü* 慮 (to reflect); moral feelings such as *jing* 敬 (respect) and *xiao* 孝 (filial affection); and specific moral virtues such as

12. As Thomas Dixon has shown, the use of the term “emotions” to refer collectively to these heightened physical and mental states is a fairly recent phenomenon. The term was specifically coined in the early nineteenth century to define, in physiological and biological terms, aspects of human experience that had hitherto been understood in a more complex, subtle, and differentiated manner. Previously, there had existed a variety of terms such as “appetites,” “passions,” “affections,” and “sentiments,” indicating the movements of the various levels of the soul, and categories such as “affections” and “moral sentiments,” which entailed both “rational and voluntary movements of the soul, while being subjectively warm and lively psychological states.” The replacement of this differentiated vocabulary by the single term “emotions” was, thus, of momentous significance, and it is to this event that we can trace the reductive view of emotions as “a set of morally disengaged, bodily, non-cognitive and involuntary feelings.” Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 3.

ren 仁 (humaneness) and *li* 禮 (ritual propriety, propriety). And finally, given my focus on relationship between thinking about emotions and thinking about the self's relationship to the world, I will examine the discussions surrounding terms of self-reference such as *zi* 自, *ji* 己, *shen* 身, and *ti* 體 (body); psychophysical sites within the human constitution in which emotions were presumed to operate, especially *xing* 性 (human nature, the inborn nature) and *xin* 心 (the heart-mind); terms of movement and activity such as *dong* 動 (movement, activity), *gan* 感 (arousal), and *ying* 應 (response); and references to the cosmos as a whole and its fundamental constituent elements: *tian* 天 (heaven/nature), *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth), *li* 理 (pattern/coherence), *ziran* 自然 (what is so of itself/spontaneity), *dao* 道 (the Way), and *qi* 氣 (material/psycho-physical force).

Developments in thinking about all these realms are of crucial importance for understanding the trajectory in which the mainstream account of emotions developed, and for keeping within view the basic multivalence of emotions. The emotions are, and always have been, many things—often many things in conflict with one another. History tells us that this multivalence has not only given rise to diverse formulations of what the emotions are but also has been a major source of fascination with the topic itself. This is a point that Ronald De Sousa has stressed by way of his image of emotions as a “philosophical hub.” De Sousa has noted that the potency of emotions as a category has to do with the way it leads us to basic questions of philosophy—questions pertaining to epistemology, ontology, logical form, philosophical psychology, and ethics—through the “antinomies” arising from them. And that, with respect to the basic polarities that define our thinking about human existence—such as those between inner and outer, reason and feeling, freedom and determination, unity and multiplicity, truth and falsity, passivity and activity, and so on—they represent conflicting and, often, equally viable propositions.¹³

This image of the emotions as a hub captures something of the wide spectrum of possibilities pursued by Chinese thinkers over the centuries: some argued that emotions emanated from within, while others stressed that they were provoked by events in the outside world; some argued that they possessed a natural coherence and direction, while others focused on their disruption of any unified purpose; some regarded them as sources of moral agency, while others emphasized their essential passivity; some argued for their importance in joining individuals together into a community, while others regarded them as fundamentally divisive and therefore requiring the force of more reasoned considerations. Such ontological and ethical ambivalence of emotions, and their potentiality to

13. De Sousa enumerates, in particular, five antinomies: the antinomy of rationality, the antinomy of objectivity, the antinomy of activity and passivity, the antinomy of integrity, and the antinomy of determinism. To this list he attaches a sixth point—the ambivalence of emotions—pertaining to the fact that the same situation can evoke multiple, and often incompatible, emotions. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 1–20.

straddle both sides of the divide, has important bearing on my approach to the emotions. It must challenge, as I have argued above, the assumption that emotions represent a “subjective” realm that pertains to the perspectives and experiences of particular individuals and as such, are not “objective.” It also allows for a more seamless transition toward the idea that the wide spectrum of possibilities for thinking emotions in early China corresponded to diverse ways of conceptualizing the interaction and dynamic of influence between self and the natural world. Competing accounts of emotions sustained vastly different possibilities of thinking about this interaction, and the mainstream tradition settled on one in particular: one that affirmed that human beings could know the world, confer meaning, and embody the creative agency of the cosmos itself.

SHIFTING CONCEPTUAL AND MORAL LANDSCAPES

Historically, the emergence of emotions as a major focus of ethical discussion in early China accompanied the rise of philosophical inquiry itself. Explaining why a certain approach to the emotions came to dominate the early philosophical tradition thus involves probing some of the broader forces and developments that engendered philosophical speculation among Warring States thinkers. In recent decades, scholars of early China have sought to contextualize the emergence of philosophy during the Warring States period by linking intellectual changes with political, religious, and institutional developments leading up to this period. These studies have shown how a confluence of historical events—the creation of centralized, autonomous states, the emergence of the intellectual/scholar-official class (*shi* 士), the secularization of political life, and the shifting locus of moral authority—contributed to the interest in philosophical thinking and gave rise to a distinct set of concerns and priorities.¹⁴ Although these developments will not be the focus of my attention here, it is worth providing a brief sketch now, both because they show the practical contexts in which philosophical ideas were formulated and because they provide a helpful reference point for elaborating the kinds of conceptual contexts that I do focus on in my study.

The period with which this study begins, spanning roughly the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, was one of political turbulence and sweeping transformations. Straddling the era between the late Spring and Autumn (*Chun qiu* 春秋) and Warring States (*Zhan guo* 戰國) periods, it was a time of intense political

14. The emergence of philosophical discourse in China around this time parallels contemporaneous developments in other major civilizations, including Classical Greece and India. Historians have long argued that this period in Chinese history represented a major turning point, and that one of its distinguishing features was a transition to an era of tremendous intellectual vitality. Following Karl Jaspers, Heiner Roetz has identified this period as China’s “Axial Age” moment, which it underwent in parallel with other great world civilizations. See Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction Under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

and military competition following in the wake of the effective collapse of the Western Zhou 周 Dynasty (twelfth century BCE–771 BCE), which had for centuries claimed dominion over the north China plain. The decline of the Zhou disrupted the balance of power that had been created among the various feudal states within its sphere of authority. With the Zhou no longer capable of controlling the ambitions of its former vassal states, regional overlords began to centralize authority and amass resources and followers to create their own independent states. The rulers of these states, now assuming the titles and trappings of kingship, began to wage war on neighboring states in an effort to enlarge their domains.¹⁵ What ensued was a period of ongoing warfare among competing kingdoms, which eventually resulted in the creation of the first empire under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE).

This inter-state political situation went hand in hand with basic structural changes in the domestic political arena, where the process of centralization proceeded alongside a struggle for power among rulers and aristocratic families. This led to a general reorientation of intellectual life, as well: centralization depended on the formation of new alliances between rulers and the newly emergent scholar-official class, whose expertise and advice were being increasingly sought out by rulers, who regarded them as vital to their political success. Early philosophers' ideas reflected their new position: critical of traditional social and political hierarchies based on aristocratic bloodlines and values, they put forth diverse views about power, governance, and self-cultivation that undermined the existing clan-based structure of society and shifted the emphasis onto realms within individual control.

These developments were further sustained by the changing religious landscape. It was during this time that the presence of gods and spirits receded from view in political and moral life, to be replaced by a more human-centered perspective. Before the seventh century BCE, ritual ceremonies had been performed to mediate the interaction between humans and the spirits, as exemplified by the priestly function of kings during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE). Now the rituals, divested of their previous religious function, achieved new significance: through their capacity to shape human behavior and dispositions, they became important vehicles for mediating social and political interactions. This shift in the function of ritual corresponded to a turn toward the secular goals of living well in this life and of creating an orderly and just society.¹⁶ An important consequence of such developments was a new emphasis on personal virtue over and above external markers of status and authority. As Yuri Pines has argued,

15. For this history see Edward Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," and Mark Edward Lewis, "Warring States: Political History," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chs. 5 and 9.

16. On the "metaphysical crisis" of the post-Zhou period and its role in the rise of philosophy, see A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989).

whereas in the feudal system of the early Zhou Dynasty, morality had been understood in terms of conformity to rules and norms of conduct sustained by religious authority, ancient ritual codes, and social-political hierarchies, toward the end of this period it was conceived as a matter of virtuous character and right feeling. Indeed, the term *de* 德, which had previously referred to a kind of religious “power” or “potency,” came to signify what we might call “virtue,” and pointed to the moral character or behavior of superior individuals.¹⁷

These large-scale structural transformations in the organization of state and society furnish an important context for understanding why it became politically expedient to judge people on the basis of one’s personal qualities, rather than on traditional status markers based on one’s place in a social and political hierarchy. But they do not necessarily explain how a term such as *de* 德 started to be applied to the human realm, or why it became normative. As in the case of *qing*, in which an “objective” sense of underlying reality did not simply give way to the “subjective” sense of emotions, but persisted as new layers of meaning accumulated, so did *de* retain its older sense of a power whose workings were embedded in a larger supernatural or natural process. In both cases, these presumably human categories continued to remain grounded within a broader vision of the workings of the natural world.

In general, the growing ethical and psychological orientation among Warring States philosophers was part of a shift toward more naturalistic forms of thinking. This emergent naturalism, which in the mainstream tradition amounted to a proposition that the natural world and its constituent entities (including humans) abided by certain patterns and inclinations, had distinct ethical implications. It was also bound up with the issue of what might be the basis of unity among the new collectivities of people that were being formed in an age of centralization—people whose differences were only too apparent. Was there something that all these people, despite their differences in language, physical appearance, customs, political affiliations, social practices, shared? And if so, what was it? The naturalistic orientation of this period, and the mainstream view that there might be something common to human experience that was rooted in their innate dispositions—that is, in their emotional constitution—was one answer to this question of how to forge a unity out of a bewildering diversity of human forms.

THE QUESTION OF NATURALISM IN EARLY CHINA

Invoking the term “naturalism” in the context of early China requires a certain amount of explanation and no small measure of justification. One cannot

17. Yuri Pines relates political and structural changes to the emergence of Confucian ethical norms in *Foundations of Confucian Thought. Intellectual Life in the Chingiu Period, 722-453 BCE* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002). This paragraph summarizes Pines’s findings.

innocently speak of naturalism—or, for that matter, “nature”—as though it were a fact whose properties and scope are self-evident. The very idea of nature is exactly that—an idea. And like all ideas, it possesses a history that is inscribed with competing values and conceptions. Thus, we can observe the fact that Warring States philosophical texts are filled with analogies and references to natural phenomena, and that through concepts such as *tian* 天 (heaven/nature), *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth), *li* 理 (pattern/coherence), *ziran* 自然 (what is so of itself/spontaneity), *dao* 道 (way), *wanwu* 萬物 (all things/the myriad things), and so on, early thinkers attempted to theorize about the realm of what we might call nature, or the cosmos as a whole. But it is a question what to make of such a preoccupation with understanding the workings of the natural world, and how to interpret its ethical significance.

It has been widely observed by recent scholars that early Chinese philosophers actively invoked nature in their ethical theories. But their assumptions about what nature is and what its relevance for ethics might be have varied significantly. Some just take nature as a fact—as what is objectively “out there” in the world—and thus as something to be drawn from to serve human needs and purposes. Janghee Lee, for instance, states in his study of the naturalism of Xunzi’s thought that “naturalists” are those who “take the natural realm as the source of values and resort to the way of nature for directing our ethical life and building culture and society.”¹⁸ Other scholars have gone a bit further to explain what the concern with nature tells us about the ethical perspectives of early thinkers. In an essay on Mencius, whose philosophy has been most readily identified as naturalist in orientation, Irene Bloom invokes the term “biological” to characterize Mencius’s conception of human nature. As she explains,

[It is] biological in the sense that it does not trivialize the physical body or biological needs but is attentive, as biological thought has characteristically been, to the interdependence among the parts of an individual, the internal organization within the individual, the natural phenomenon of growth, development, and maturation, and the physical and social circumstances necessary for and conducive to such development.¹⁹

This “biological” reading, then, sustains a physicalist account of Mencius’s thought, and emphasizes that Mencius’s invoking of the concept of *qi* 氣 (vital energy, psychophysical force) should be read as an argument that the workings of the mind or will are ultimately connected to the rest of the body. For Bloom, the

18. Janghee Lee, *Xunzi and Early Naturalism*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 3.

19. Irene Bloom, “Human Nature and Biological Nature in Mencius,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 1 (1997): 24.

upshot of Mencius's naturalism is the idea of a "natural complementarity among the parts of the individual."²⁰ Mencius is no dualist.

More recently, a number of scholars have appealed to the findings of modern science to explain, and validate, the interest in nature among early Chinese philosophers. These endeavors to bring science to bear on our understanding of early Chinese thought have taken diverse forms. Donald Munro has argued that evolutionary science testifies to the soundness and validity of early Confucian norms and values—particularly the early Confucian emphasis on those affectively grounded virtues such as family feeling and altruism that can be linked to the Mencian idea of the "four sprouts." By this account, two kinds of nature—the subjectively construed concept fashioned by human beings, and the physical reality of the natural world—converge in a single human aspiration: that of satisfying one's psychological and biological needs and desires.²¹ David Wong has sought to explain the early Daoist concern with nature by pointing to a modern scientific explanation for why human beings are psychologically drawn toward the natural world. Invoking the work of Edward O. Wilson, Wong states that early Daoist naturalism can be taken as a form of *biophilia*—the attraction and sense of wonder with which human beings confront the natural world—which is a trait that human beings as a species have acquired through the evolutionary process.²² And finally, in the context of Xunzi, Sor-hoon Tan has recently appealed to a classic modern notion of "naturalism" that has been invoked in the history of science—one that distinguishes between "natural" explanations, on the one hand, and "supernatural" ones, on the other, which assume the existence of "an agent or force that stands outside the familiar natural world and whose doings cannot be understood as part of it."²³ Tan has thus been specifically interested in establishing that Xunzi's ethics does not invoke supernatural agency and causation but, rather, is grounded in what we might call "nature," according to modern scientific criteria.

My reservations with these approaches arise from my sense that appealing to "natural" objects, entities, and patterns assumes, rather than explains, why appealing to such things was thought to confer authority. Moreover, it disregards the fact that to speak of "nature" is not to speak about self-evident, disconnected facts but, rather, about relationships among entities—how things are structured and organized, how they affect and move one another, what kinds of larger processes they are caught up in, and—eventually—what is the hierarchy of beings and powers. Finally, in assuming that nature is simply something to be invoked by thinkers to support their ethical or political beliefs and projects, there is a danger of reducing it to nothing more than an instrument of human purposes, and

20. Bloom, "Human Nature and Biological Nature," 25.

21. Donald Munro, *A Chinese Ethics for the New Century* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), 47–48.

22. David B. Wong, "Identifying with Nature in Early Daoism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36 (December 2009): 568–584, at 577.

23. Sor-hoon Tan, "Xunzi and Naturalistic Ethics," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49 (March 2015): 247–265, at 250.

ignoring the way in which our beliefs and projects are informed and shaped by how we understand the world. All these considerations are of crucial importance for this study, and are necessary for explaining why, and with what significance, a certain account of the emotions became mainstream.

Historians of science have invoked the term “naturalism” in a more specific way. Some have regarded naturalism as a way of defining a genre or a sphere of investigation, characterized by the endeavor to theorize about the physical world in terms of *yin*, *yang*, and the “Five Phases” (*wuxing*). Joseph Needham refers collectively to these scholars as the “School of Naturalists” founded by Zou Yan 鄒衍 (c. 350 BCE–c. 270 BCE), who were presumably the first to develop a systematic theory that united them into a comprehensive picture. Needham, thus, declares that Zou Yan was “the real founder of all Chinese scientific thought.”²⁴ Nathan Sivin, for his part, invokes the term “naturalism” in a different, specific context—that of the theory of cosmic correlations linking the workings of the cosmos with those of the polity and the human body. Sivin dates the endeavor to establish such correlations to the third century BCE, and the achievement of its “mature synthesis” to the first century BCE, with the compilation of the medical compendium, the *Huangdi Neijing* 黃帝內經 (The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor). Naturalism, here, represents a particular moment in the unfolding of scientific (and ultimately, political) thought—the moment of the Han imperial synthesis—that envisioned the entire cosmos as a unified entity animated with resonant interactions among its constituent parts.²⁵

I shall proceed from a very different understanding of “naturalism” and its relevance to both “science” and early ethics. I will not take “naturalism” in the very loose sense of appealing to “nature” as such, or of invoking broad cosmological categories such as heaven-and-earth, the myriad things, and so on. Nor do I take it in the very specific sense of making use of a particular set of concepts, such as the Five Agents, *yin* and *yang*, or of membership in a “school of naturalists” who speculated about the workings of the universe through such concepts. Nor, again, do I refer to a particular type of cosmological scheme, such as the system of cosmic correlations that achieved fruition during the late Warring States and early

24. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. 2. *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 232.

25. Nathan Sivin, “IV. The Myth of the Naturalists.” In *Medicine, Philosophy, and Religion in Ancient China: Researches and Reflections* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1995), 1–33. For a discussion of how this vision of cosmic correlations plays out at the level of the polity and the human body, see Nathan Sivin, “State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C.,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55 (June 1995): 5–37. John B. Henderson invokes the term “cosmology” in much the same way, equating “cosmology” with “correlative thinking,” which he characterizes as a perspective on the world that “draws systematic correspondences among various orders of reality or realms of the cosmos, such as the human body, the body politic, and the heavenly bodies.” Henderson further specifies that such thinking assumes a homology among these various realms in such a way that “they correspond with one another in number, in kind, in structure, or in some other basic respect, and that they form a continuum.” J. B. Henderson, “Cosmology and Concepts of Nature in Traditional,” in *Concepts of Nature. A Chinese-European Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Hans Ulrich Vogel and Günter Dux (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 181.

imperial periods. Finally, I will not be invoking current scientific criteria as my reference point for approaching and evaluating the “naturalism” of past thought, although I think that recent neurological research affirming the cooperation of cognitive and emotional processes may help to corroborate some of my conclusions about early Chinese approaches to the emotions.

In speaking of the naturalism of Warring States thought, I refer to a particular way of approaching and making sense of the natural world—humans included—in terms of intelligible processes. The philosophers in this period envisioned the world as possessing predictable patterns and revealing knowable causal relationships between entities. This was a mode of argumentation that was in currency from at least the fourth century BCE onward and that was invoked by early ethical philosophers to arrive at, or defend, certain conclusions about how human beings should live and act. And it was a mode of inquiry that had to be *invented*, to invoke a term that Geoffrey Lloyd has applied in the context of ancient Greek thought. As Lloyd explains, “there was nothing intrinsic in the Greek conception of the *naturalness* of natural phenomena.” Instead, it was the result of a competition for epistemological authority between the medical practitioners of the Hippocratic tradition, who were endeavoring to justify their own mode of inquiry by defining it against that of their rivals, whom “they were hoping to put out of business” and whose methodology they hoped to brand as retrograde because of their appeal to supernatural causes.²⁶ This emphasis on the inventedness of the idea and value of nature resonates with my own sense of the naturalism of Warring States philosophy. The central tension in my narrative, however, is not between those who appealed to a naturalistic model of the universe versus those who presumably adhered to non-natural, superstitious explanations. Rather, it was among competing naturalisms, each offering different accounts of the workings of the natural world—and, by extension, of human beings.

COMPETING NATURALISMS AND MODELS OF THE SELF

During the Warring States period, philosophers appealed to a number of competing accounts of what nature was like and what implications it had for human beings. There was the view, pursued by the mainstream thinkers, that the world functioned in certain predictable and intelligible ways, that the cosmos as a whole was dynamic, and that its constituent parts were characterized by an inner dynamism that took the form of certain patterned inclinations toward fulfillment. This corresponded to a claim about human beings that was of crucial ethical significance—namely, that they were self-movers, possessing the same inner dynamism as operated in the natural world more generally. This self-movement

26. Italics in original. Lloyd, “Greek Antiquity,” 1–24.

was constituted by the workings of human perceptual faculties (emotive and cognitive) that, being part of the larger cosmic order, gave human beings access to the coherent order of things. The emotions, in this context, represented proper and natural inclinations that moved toward the human realization of their potentiality. These assumptions were shared among the mainstream thinkers considered in this book, even if they differed widely in terms of how they characterized the tendencies and inclinations of human beings.

But there were other accounts. One that we can discern among the views articulated in certain non-mainstream texts, and by some interlocutors of the mainstream thinkers, is the idea that things in the world are inert rather than dynamic. The world is an arena in which things happen because they impinge and act on one another, and not because of any inherent inclination to move or act in any particular way. Within such a vision, human thoughts and emotions are to be understood as set into motion by the force of other things. Like other entities in the world, human beings are passive receptors. This view can be seen in some of the “outlier” perspectives that are mentioned in the mainstream texts, such as that of Mencius’s contemporary, Gaozi (fourth century BCE).²⁷ It can also be found in excavated material like the Guodian bamboo text, the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 (Nature Emerges from the Mandate).

Believed to date to the late fourth century BCE, the *Xing zi ming chu* has attracted the attention of scholars because of its concern with emotions, which it develops over the course of theorizing about *qing* (emotions), *xing* (the inborn nature), *yu* (desire), and *xin* (heart/mind). These categories are brought together in such a way as to present a very clear picture of humans as essentially passive beings whose emotions, preferences, and judgments are prompted by “things” (*wu* 物) in the outside world, as follows:

In general, although humans possess a nature (*xing*), their mind (*xin*) is without a fixed orientation (*zhi* 志). It depends on things and only then becomes active; it depends on pleasures and only then is moved; it depends on repeated study and only then becomes fixed.

Whatever we could point to as a “nature,” its basic quality is that of inertness: it lacks a “fixed orientation” and depends on things for movement and direction. In keeping with such a picture, the emotions are explained in rather materialist and mechanistic terms: the *qi* 氣 of joy, anger, sorrow, and sadness represent the promptings of things that “take hold of them” (*wu qu zhi ye* 物取之也). As traces of encounters between the self and the world, the emotions transmit movement and attributes from the external world to the inner realm of the person.²⁸

27. Gaozi’s views and his disputes with Mencius will be discussed in chapter 5, this volume.

28. This passivity has been a major theme in scholarly interpretations of this text. See, among others, Erica F. Brindley, “Music and ‘Seeking One’s Heart-mind’ in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*,” *Dao* 5, no. 2 (2006): 247–255; and Puett, “Ethics of Responding Properly.” Some scholars have argued that the conception of the mind (*xin*) in the

This model corresponds to a somewhat hedonistic picture of human beings, since the achievement of any “fixed orientation” eventually depends on things arousing pleasure (*le* 樂). In view of such an orientation, the text stresses proper education and the right cultural influences to steer people in the correct direction. It is through the proper deployment of those venerable cultural institutions devised by the sages—poetry (*shi* 詩), documents (*shu* 書), rites (*li* 禮) and music (*yue* 樂)—that one can “instruct” (*jiao* 教) the people. By using the right kinds of external promptings to instruct the people, it becomes possible to “produce virtue in the person (*sheng de yu zhong* 生德於中).”²⁹ The *Xing zi ming chu*, thus, rejects the very possibility that we might possess any coherent drives or tendencies that are rooted in our inborn constitution. Instead, we are fully bound by the realm of things, and our emotions, preferences, and judgments signal our condition of vulnerability to things beyond our control. Ultimately, one cannot even speak of an intelligible structure of responsiveness at all, for “what one judges as good and what one judges as bad depend on circumstances (*shi* 勢).”

The vastly different naturalistic accounts that we find in the mainstream tradition and in a text like the *Xing zi ming chu* correspond to fundamentally contrasting accounts of personhood and of the workings of the natural world. While the one regards human beings as “blank slates” that lack inherent movement and directionality, and that are ultimately pushed about by things in the external world, the other holds that human beings possess certain patterned inclinations that point toward a standard of fulfillment.³⁰ Such descriptions have normative implications: issues of the sources and directionality of movement and activity raise questions of causality and agency; issues of the sources of coherence and order raise questions of power, knowledge, and authority. Thus, the idea that human beings are capable of self-movement, and are inclined toward fulfillment, assumes that agency is ultimately located within the person. Naturalistic and ethical inquiry are joined by shared terms, categories, and logic, as well as a shared concern with the fundamental question of what a human being is like. Do humans possess any inherent tendencies at all, or are they merely responsive to external stimuli? Are they self-movers, or are they moved by things? Is the course of human life driven along by certain inner necessities and potentialities, or is

text is compatible with notions of free will and autonomy. Franklin Perkins surveys and refutes these arguments in “Motivation and the Heart in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*,” *Dao* 8, no. 2 (2009): 117–131.

29. *Xing zi ming chu*, strip 16–18, *Guodian chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), 179.

30. Chen Lai offers a significantly different account of *Xing zi ming chu* and of its implications for the character of the mainstream philosophical tradition. In Chen’s reading, the *Xing zi ming chu*, with its vision of human nature as morally open-ended, best reflects the views of Confucius himself, who refrained from attributing a determinate ethical character to *xing*. In Chen’s reading, the theories of the goodness and badness of human nature that were forwarded by Mencius and Xunzi, respectively, represent radical positions that departed fundamentally from the “mainstream Confucian view” as represented by Confucius and texts like the *Xing zi ming chu*. See Chen Lai, “The Guodian Bamboo Slips and Confucian Theories of Human Nature,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, Supplement to Volume 37* (December 2010): 33–50.

it determined by one's environment? For all their differences, the mainstream Warring States philosophers were united by an assumption that human beings possessed certain shared inclinations that were rooted in their *xing* or in other faculties and capacities that they possessed constitutionally.

That such questions were being posed at all has important consequences for how we are to understand the character of early Chinese thought and intellectual life. First, it displays a basic interest among early Chinese philosophers in achieving objective knowledge about the world.

Here we bump up against a longstanding scholarly tradition denying that early Chinese thinkers were motivated by the pursuit of what we might refer to as "truth."³¹ The argument goes that, since the very epistemological tradition in China was oriented towards a distinct set of concerns, and was rooted in its own, particular world view and linguistic structure, the operative criteria of knowledge and understanding were fundamentally different from those we find in the West. This idea of radical difference has been taken to the point of assuming that, because of the particular configuration of political, social, linguistic, and conceptual priorities that shaped the topics of philosophical inquiry, early Chinese thinkers were not concerned with knowledge *as such*. Instead, the criteria of knowledge were determined by certain practical exigencies or situations.³² Such views have extended to a rejection of the idea that early philosophers in China might have even been concerned with investigating the nature of reality.³³ After all, the argument goes, we are hard pressed to find a single early Chinese thinker who offered the kind of sustained inquiry into ontology, physics, metaphysics, or epistemology that we find, say, in the ancient Greek tradition. Chinese philosophers, being concerned with "practical" knowledge of "how-to," were not concerned with *what is* or *how things are*.

If we must invoke the ancient Greeks, it is indeed true that the form of their philosophical speculation was dramatically different from those of early Chinese philosophers. The mainstream Warring States thinkers did not endeavor to systematically probe and model the cosmos, interrogate the ultimate foundations of knowing, or extract some realm of ultimate, transcendent truth. But it does not follow from this that forms of inquiry that do not prioritize such concerns are not motivated by an interest in knowledge as such or in achieving true understanding of the world. Nor does the preoccupation with ethical and political

31. Alexis McLeod's recent book offers a sustained critique of this way of approaching early Chinese thought and argues for the relevance of a concept of truth for a number of key early thinkers, including those discussed in this book. See his *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

32. E.g., Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy and 'Truth,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (1985): 491–517; Roger T. Ames, "Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*. 'From Here, on the Bridge, over the River Hao,'" in his *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 219–230.

33. See, e.g., Christoph Harbsmeier, "Conceptions of Knowledge in Ancient China," in *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Hans Lenk and Gregor Paul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 11–30.

matters among early Chinese philosophers mean that the criteria of knowledge were *determined* by practical considerations of utility or other types of consequences. Instead, the mainstream thinkers assumed that knowledge and right judgment should be properly based on a plausible account of the natural world, and of the workings of things in general. Having a right picture, in other words, was a criterion of knowledge and a basis for drawing proper conclusions about things.³⁴ Whether it was Mozi appealing to craft analogies or Mencius invoking the natural tendencies of water, early thinkers forwarded competing accounts of the phenomenal workings of the world as the basis for drawing conclusions about what human beings were like and how they should live and act. By extension, they were also, deeply and fundamentally, concerned with understanding what we might refer to as “the self.”

The problem of the self has long been an important topic of contemporary philosophical discussions, as well as of historical interpretations of past philosophy. In contemporary philosophy, particular attention has been paid to such issues as whether the self exists, whether it possesses an essence, and whether it can be seen as persisting over time.³⁵ More general philosophical approaches to this topic, and those that seek to trace the origins of something like a self in the Western tradition, have focused on certain modern values that have come to be linked with such a concept, especially individualism, free will, uniqueness, autonomy, and inwardness.³⁶ In light of these associations, the topic has been a particularly charged one in the Chinese context.³⁷ One question that has come to take prominence has been that of whether, in fact, “the Chinese” even *had* sense of self, and whether one can identify any traces of it in the early philosophical tradition. Many Sinologists entered this discussion to weigh in on the persistent view, articulated by certain prominent Western thinkers, such

34. It would be pertinent to bring up here the related issue of the application of the term “science” in pre-modern contexts. In his defense of its use in ancient societies such as those of ancient Greece and early China, Geoffrey Lloyd has argued that the criterion for its application should not be whether or not a given set of ideas or practices “deliver truth” as defined by current scientific standards, but whether they represent “analogous ambitions” with respect to understanding and making sense of the world. Science, in this context, is thus to be understood in terms of certain aims or goals, rather than of the correctness of its picture of the world. In G. E. R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

35. For some recent discussions of such issues, see Shaun Gallagher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a more historical approach that addresses these issues, see Richard Sorabji, *Self. Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

36. The classic work on this topic remains Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

37. That the matter has received such extended treatment is due, in large part, to the fact that it is of direct relevance to the interpretation of past thinkers: how one construes traditional Chinese ideas about the self has bearing on how we understand and relate to the workings of authority in contemporary China (and in East Asia more generally). It also speaks to the applicability, in the Chinese context, of notions of active concern, such as human rights, democracy, and freedom. See, e.g., Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

as Hegel, that the Chinese did not have a real conception of self in the sense that they did not envision the self as individual, autonomous, and capable of exercising a free will. In Hegel's account, the individual in China was totally subordinated to the state, the community, and the force of law. Such views were often adopted by twentieth-century Sinologists, and different versions of this thesis can be found in the study of all matters Chinese, from all periods and disciplines.³⁸

Recent scholars have done their part to counter this perception by addressing specifically the kinds of values that have been assumed to be lacking in China—individuality, interiority, uniqueness, and so on. What has emerged from this endeavor is a body of scholarship that has argued, in various ways, for the relevance of these values in the Chinese tradition as well. The topic of individualism, in particular, has been a theme in the work of Roger Ames, Irene Bloom, Erica Brindley, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Henry Rosemont Jr., Yü Yingshi, and others, who have endeavored to show how aspects of traditional Chinese thought and culture could, indeed, be understood as features of a broadened Chinese conception of the individual.³⁹ Here I shall address specifically the approaches of Erica Brindley and Roger Ames in order to lay out more precisely the contours of my own project.

Erica Brindley has made a case for its relevance in the context of early China by redefining its essential attribute—agency—in ways that better suit its cultural and historical context. Brindley argues that an essential feature of the conception of agency in early China was the recognition of conformity—an idea that seems to jar with modern Western approaches to agency, which tend to emphasize autonomy and active, causal agency. Brindley argues, however, that conformity and “passive” agency are perfectly compatible with the early Chinese conception. As she sums up this idea,

Early Chinese forms of individualism do not focus on the radical autonomy of the individual, but rather on the holistic integration of the empowered individual with forces and authorities in his or her surroundings (family, society, and cosmos). For early Chinese thinkers, there is no such

38. See the discussion of this literature in Roger T. Ames, “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Confucianism,” in *Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. R. T. Ames, Wimal Dissanayake, and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 187–212. Some examples cited by Ames include Donald J. Munro, “The Shape of Chinese Values in the Eye of an American Philosopher,” in *The China Difference*, ed. Ross Terrill (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Mark Elvin, “Between Heaven and Heaven: Conceptions of the Self in China,” in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Herbert Fingarette, “The Problem of the Self in the *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 2 (1979): 129–140. Fingarette's approach to the category of self in the *Analects* will be discussed in the next chapter.

39. Erica Brindley cites and discusses the positions of these scholars in the introduction to her book, *Individualism in Early China. Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), xvi–xxi.

thing as unfettered autonomy or freedom of will, in line with Kantian notions of the self.⁴⁰

Although I do not have a normative commitment to the idea of individualism per se, and to extending its application to the early China context, I share Brindley's recognition of agency as an essential feature of the early mainstream thinkers. I am also sympathetic to Brindley's project of expanding our conception of agency and individuality, and highlighting its compatibility with other models of authority, such as a notion of self-empowerment that depends on the authority of forces larger than oneself. In my view, however, we can go even further in certain respects by establishing the importance of causal agency and recognizing that it was on that issue that we can locate a basic difference in the accounts of emotions posited by mainstream and nonmainstream thinkers.

Apart from whether or not human beings possessed agency, which I see as a central concern in early debates about the workings of the natural world, another major question was that of how to approach contours of the self—that is, what kind of model we are dealing with when we speak about the self. This is a topic that has been explored at length by Roger Ames, whose views I depart from at a very basic level. In an essay devoted to the problem of self in early Confucian thought, Ames has made a series of proposals that suggest a radical difference between early Chinese approaches to the self and those we find in the West—a difference that can be located in the very language and imagery through which the cosmos and human beings are described. Whereas the classical Western tradition posits a cosmogony arising from a divine maker who orders and directs phenomena into a unified whole, “like Homeric leaders marshalling their troops for battle,” the Confucian tradition was premised on a noncosmogonic vision where “the power of creativity and the responsibility for creative product resides more broadly in the phenomena themselves in their ongoing interactive processes of being.”⁴¹ Ames does not acknowledge here the diverse and complex ways in which cosmological theories relate to conceptions of the human being, nor the fact that an *analogical* relationship with the divine maker can be (and has been) a source of the belief in human creativity and agency.

Ames also deduces from this contrast in cosmological theories that the Western and Chinese traditions derived from their respective traditions fundamentally different kinds of questions pertaining to the nature of the self:

Cosmogonic concern generates metaphysical questions, a search for essential principles: How did the cosmos begin? What are its first principles? What is the origin of the existence and growth of natural phenomena? What are their essential defining principles, and how are they

40. Brindley, *Individualism in Early China*, xxvii.

41. Ames, “The Focus-Field Self,” 199.

actualized? Noncosmogonic cosmology, on the other hand, will generate primarily historical and rhetorical questions: Who and what are our historical antecedents that have given us our present definition? . . . The thinker's role in the noncosmogonic tradition, then, will not be as much to discover and define self as to create a model of self that is persuasive and evokes emulation.⁴²

I believe that, despite the clearly different approaches to cosmogony and cosmology that we find in the ancient Greek and Chinese traditions, the conclusion that the endeavor to "discover and define the self" can somehow be distinguished from that of "creat[ing] a model of self that is persuasive and evokes emulation" posits a false distinction. I do not see how one can be engaged in the latter enterprise without having some working conception of what the self is like, even if it is not systematically formulated. How early Chinese thinkers approached this issue was certainly different from how the ancient Greeks approached it, but this does not negate the possibility that these Chinese thinkers were interested in understanding what a human being was.

Ames's ultimate conclusion is that, unlike in the West, where the self was conceived as possessing *being*—something like an unchanging, essential kernel that we can refer to as its "nature"—in the Chinese context, the self is "an ongoing poietic process." The person, here, is "not some sort of *being*, but first and foremost a *doing* or *making* and only derivatively and retrospectively something done."⁴³ The Confucian self, then, is caught up in a dynamic process of creativity and change, "free of any definite and specific goals."⁴⁴ For this reason, we cannot use concepts to speak about the self. Concepts ought only be used in a situation in which "'self' can be understood as having some universal and hence formal definition."⁴⁵ In the place of such reified notions, Ames proposes his model of the self as a "focus-field," which is a kind of summation of particular moments and relationships in which the self is engaged with others.

Although differences in the conceptual frameworks of thinking about the self in early China and ancient Greece are important, and Ames's observations particularly about the contours of the Confucian self are very much on target, I believe that these observations about differences have been taken much further than is warranted. The dichotomies he invokes are premised on extreme and highly simplified examples of "Western" ideas that are assumed to be essential and representative—ideas that, moreover, need to be more carefully extricated from one another. The arguments pertaining to the self and the human that I forward in this book depart in a number of respects from the conclusions

42. Ibid., 199.

43. Ibid., 200.

44. Ibid., 208.

45. Ibid.

advanced by Ames. First, on matters of cosmology, I shall assume that the sheer fact of assuming a cosmogonic or noncosmogonic paradigm is inconclusive, and that the implications of a cosmological theory for the human being hinge upon the particular picture of the macrocosm–microcosm relationship that is operative. I will generalize this point with respect to conceptions of nature more generally. Second, on the issue of concepts, I do not accept the idea that a concept is only applicable for things about which one can imply “a universal and hence formal definition,” positing, in effect, a kind of metaphysical *being*. I shall assume, instead, that, dynamic as it is, Confucians and other early Chinese thinkers were interested in conceptualizing and theorizing about things in the world—including the human self—and that this interest accompanied the admittedly practical nature of their concerns. A dynamic conception of self is no less a conception than a static one built on a series of abstract propositions (wherever such might actually be found).

My focus in this study, and my approach to the problem of self more generally, will be about conceptions of the self and the way the self’s relationship with the world is at once mediated and given shape through conceptions of emotions. This means that my interest in the category of self does not have to do primarily with issues of individualism and autonomy but, rather, with the way in which the self is pictured as a kind of structured whole, and with how this picturing is connected to the conceptions of the natural world. I shall thus be concerned with questions of unity, structure, and integrity, but also of agency and the nature of movement and change. Moreover, given that, in endeavoring to conceptualize and make sense of the self and the world, early Chinese thinkers were striving for objective knowledge of how things were, they were operating on the assumption that the world was, in fact, knowable and that they had access to this knowledge. The early mainstream thinkers’ approach to emotions in terms of underlying human dispositions and potentialities, and as intelligent and appropriate forms of responsiveness, thus ultimately went hand in hand with a belief in the possibility of cognitive agency. Emotions were not merely subjective emanations arising from our encounters with things in the world. Instead, they were forms of knowing that were themselves patterned and that embodied the intelligible workings of the world itself.

CONCLUSION

The wide-ranging views of emotions espoused by early Chinese philosophers reveal a diverse intellectual landscape in which basic questions of ethics and politics were the focus of major concern. The discussions that unfolded were part of more fundamental debates about what human beings were like, and how human beings formed a part of the world and cosmos. The thinkers whose

ideas would come to be identified with the mainstream philosophical tradition were united by a shared assumption that the emotions were both intelligent and intelligible, and that they were human instantiation of patterns that pervaded the natural world. Such an idea was encapsulated in the semantic range of the term *qing* 情, which encompassed feelings and emotions, human dispositions, and the underlying, characteristic reality of things. When the mainstream thinkers joined together this range of ideas, they invoked a certain conception of the natural world to make a distinct argument about the self and the proper form of the ethical life—namely, that the proper life was one in which human beings optimally realized certain potentialities that were inherent in their constitutional workings.

The fact that the early mainstream thinkers appealed to the emotions to make their case did not signal a subjectivization of ethics, a choice of the emotive over the cognitive faculty, or a relinquishing of agency. As they defined them, the emotions had the capacity to instantiate the patterned workings of the cosmos, and to actualize these patterns within the person. To this extent, the emotions were objective phenomena that were both natural and normative. Moreover, emotions represented a genuine interface between the self and the world, and—properly realized—reflected true insight into the workings of the world. Finally, the mainstream thinkers firmly rejected the idea that emotions represented nothing more than passive responses to the world. While they acknowledged that, in their ordinary workings, emotions were vulnerable to the influence from the world and might thus threaten one's inner coherence and self-control, they clearly specified that there was also an optimal state of realization in which emotional fulfillment joined with the patterned workings of the cosmos to confer tremendous power and agency onto the individual. Such an ideal pervaded the thought of all the mainstream thinkers, regardless of school and intellectual affiliation, and would dramatically shape the course of thought and ethical values for millennia to come.

Emotions and the Integrated Self in the Analects of Confucius

Confucius (Kong Qiu 孔丘 or Kongzi 孔子, trad. 551–479 BCE) is traditionally regarded as the founding figure of the most influential intellectual tradition in China, which, for better or for worse, has come to be known as “Confucianism.” A distinct feature of the Confucian moral tradition as it developed into imperial times is a shared assumption that the fulfillment of emotions and desires was basic to what it meant to be a fully realized person, and that the workings of emotions could furnish the guide for right action and understanding. As Michael Nylan has observed, in pre-Buddhist traditional China, “emotion, intuition, and moral judgment were thought to work in tandem, rather than in opposition to one another.”¹ This is, in large part, due to an ethical tradition that was largely shaped by ideas and values articulated in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) of Confucius.²

One of the central themes of this text is that a fully realized person does not just do the right thing, but does so with the right attitude and emotional disposition. As conceived by Confucius, what distinguishes perfected individuals—the *junzi* 君子, or people of *ren* 仁 (humaneness)—is a capacity to respond fully, spontaneously, and genuinely to life’s situations. Perhaps the clearest articulation of this ideal is the famous “one-line autobiography,” in which Confucius reflects upon his own life trajectory, signposting the various stages of achievement as they led from his youthful embarkation upon a life of self-cultivation (or learning, *xue* 學) to its ultimate fulfillment:

At fifteen, I set my mind (*zhi* 志) upon self-cultivation (*xue* 學); at thirty, I took my stand; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires (*cong xin suo yu* 從心所欲) without overstepping the bounds of propriety. [2.4]³

1. Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 99.

2. I invoke the name “Confucius” as a term of convenience to refer to the figure of Confucius (Kongzi), as reconstructed through the text that is traditionally taken as the record of his teachings—in this case, the *Analects*. I apply the same practice to the other thinkers discussed in this book.

3. Passages from the *Analects* are quoted, with occasional modifications, from *Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003). Source passages refer to chapter

As described here, the process of self-realization begins with a conscious decision to cultivate oneself, proceeds through renewed affirmation and understanding of the larger forces of one's destiny (or Heaven's Mandate, *tian ming* 天命), a harmonizing of one's faculties with the realities of the world, and ultimately, the achievement of one's "heart's desires." This final phase is not about satisfying just any kind of desire; it is about achieving a state of perfect integration between what one wants to do and what one ought to do. It is about developing and perfecting oneself in such a way that one is naturally drawn to the good, and delights in it. Only those who are genuine in their feelings, and can give full expression to them, can be said to be fully spontaneous. Reaching such a condition requires a lifetime of cultivation, and Confucius professes to have managed it only at the age of seventy.

That the perfect individual is one who has achieved the fulfillment of her desires and emotional dispositions is a widely appreciated feature of Confucius's thought. Myeong-seok Kim's observation that "the cultivated nobleman in the *Analects* is not merely a person of equanimity who is calmly concerned about the well-being of oneself as well as of others, but a person of rich emotional experiences that reveal his character"⁴ is hardly one that scholars nowadays would dispute.⁵ But what such a view might entail and what its larger ethical significance might be bear further analysis and discussion. Although the prominence of emotions and dispositions is frequently noted in studies of Confucian thought, the issue is usually brought up in the context of virtues such as humaneness (*ren*) or filiality (*xiao* 孝), or of morally framed discussions of self-cultivation (*xue* 學) or the Way (Dao 道). Within such contexts, a central concern has been what to make of the potential tension between being moral and being genuinely disposed to being moral.

David Nivison has perhaps stated the problem most directly when he identified a "paradox of virtue" running through the early Confucian tradition more generally. This paradox involves the fact that those who "teach" morality ultimately want their students to *desire* morality, not just to act morally. But how do you get people to do that? This is Confucius's dilemma, and the only way out, according to Nivison, is to place the realm of feelings and desires under the control of an essentially rational "will." According to Nivison, the task of

and line numbers from *A Concordance to the Lunyu* (論語逐字索引), ed. D. C. Lau, Ho Che Wah, and Chen Fong Ching. *ICS Series* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1995), hereafter abbreviated as *ICS Lunyu*. This passage is from *ICS Lunyu* 2.4/3/1–2.4/3/2.

4. Myeong-seok Kim, "An Inquiry into the Development of the Ethical Theory of the Emotions in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*" (PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 2008), 84.

5. Studies of Confucius and early Confucian thought that have emphasized this point include Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*; Kwong-loi Shun, "Ren and Li in the *Analects*," in *Confucius and the Analects*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Roetz, *Confucian Ethics*.

self-cultivation boils down to such an endeavor.⁶ Edward Slingerland adopts this approach in his study of the early mainstream philosophical tradition, emphasizing that Confucian self-cultivation involves embracing contradictory metaphors that insist on its “naturalness,” while clearly embracing the interventions of “craft” and “effort.”⁷

A. C. Graham, for his part, approaches the ideal confluence of feelings and desires, on the one hand, and morality, on the other, from another direction. He takes the optimal condition of fully integrating desire and duty as a fact, and thus concludes from passage 2.4, quoted earlier, that “the Chinese assumption is that action starts from spontaneous motives and that before asking ‘What shall I do?’ I am already being drawn in one direction or another.”⁸ Graham suggests that such an ideal represents a kind of conflation of the “Western” distinction between fact and value—a conflation that he sees running through the Chinese intellectual tradition as a whole. “One might be disposed to reject this as an obvious fallacy,” Graham notes, but then goes on to affirm that the circularity of this logic is simply a part of Chinese thinking. To support this view, Graham cites the work of David Hall and Roger Ames, who propose that Confucius’s thought cannot be subject to the kind of “logical” or “rational” criteria that we have come to expect of Western philosophical thinking. As he summarizes their argument: “Confucius prefers the aesthetic order sustained by ritual, music, and performative naming to the order stained by laws and punishments, which is ‘rational.’”⁹

As I have outlined in my introduction, the endeavor to identify in the early Chinese philosophical tradition either a reason versus emotion split or a nonrational (or even, irrational) orientation arises from the same problematic dichotomy that considers the realm of emotions as fully distinct from cognitive, ordered processes. Eschewing such categories, I shall pursue the general topic from a very different direction—one that considers the kind of *conceptual* work that the emotions and desires appear to be doing in the *Analects*. My general argument is that Confucius’s emphasis on the vital role of emotions in moral life reflects a new awareness of the depth of the human self as an arena for moral action. The point is not that emotions, in some generic sense, are normative and that moral value is now to be determined subjectively. Rather, it is that, conceptualized in a certain way, the emotions could potentially serve as a force of unity and integration in

6. David S. Nivison, “Weakness of Will in Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” in *The Ways of Confucianism. Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. D. S. Nivison and Bryan W. Van Norden, with an introduction by Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996), 80–82.

7. Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70–75. Slingerland proposes a more oppositional reading than Joel Kupperman, whose treatment of this topic he responds to. Joel Kupperman, “Confucius and the Problem of Naturalness,” *Philosophy East and West* 18, no. 3 (1968): 175–185.

8. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 29. I shall not get into the issue of Graham’s assumption here that the *Analects* speaks for the whole of the “Chinese” tradition.

9. *Ibid.*, 30. See Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*.

human life. In focusing on the spontaneity, depth, and genuineness of feeling as the true mark of the perfected individual, Confucius offered an account of emotions as a vehicle for ensuring the stable identity and continuity of the self. The emotions thus played a crucial role in providing a structure and integrative force through which a distinct sphere of the self could be forged and brought together into a coherent whole.

THE PROBLEM OF THE “SELF” IN THE *ANALECTS*

The very proposition that we could speak of a concept of “self” in the *Analects* brings us into controversial territory. Herbert Fingarette has argued that we cannot properly invoke the term in the context of Confucius. This issue is a major undercurrent in *Confucius: The Secular as the Sacred*, his provocative and influential study of Confucian ritual. Here, Fingarette describes ritual as a “magical” and supremely efficacious performance that enables one’s moral commitments to become outwardly visible, transmuting moral identity into socially embedded conduct. In highlighting the creative efficacy of ritual performance, Fingarette effectively dispels the traditional characterization of Confucius as a moral and cultural conservative who sought to reinstate a past order by advocating a mindless conformity to its rituals. But in doing so, he implies that whatever we might identify as a “self” is dissolved into the community, which ritual has now charged with sacred significance.¹⁰

In “The Problem of Self in the *Analects*,” Fingarette confronts head-on the issue of the self as a category for understanding Confucius. His conclusion is that the term is not applicable to Confucius because the latter did not explicitly articulate any theories pertaining to an “inner psychic life.” Although he acknowledges that Confucius recognizes subjects that pursue goals, exercise a will (*zhi* 志), possess bodies, make decisions, and so on, these elements do not amount to a conception of self. This is because, ultimately, the norms to which all human beings should aspire—*Dao*, humaneness, ritual propriety—are not unique and individual to the person, but are absolute and universal. There is, as he put it, “no reification of a Faculty or Will, no inner machinery or equilibrium of psychic forces, no inner theatre in which an inner drama takes place, no inner community with ruler and ruled.”¹¹ Fingarette’s criteria of self, then, are based on certain attributes commonly associated with the modern Western conception of self: a metaphysical core, a psychological theory of the will, and a recognition of the uniqueness and individuality of selves.

10. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as the Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 1–17.

11. Fingarette, “The Problem of the Self,” 129–140, at 133.

Such claims have exercised many a scholar of early Chinese philosophy for decades, and they remain the touchstone for discussions of the topic today.¹² Some scholars, like Benjamin Schwartz and Kwong-loi Shun, have countered that the absence of a psychological or subjectivistic vocabulary in no way indicates that Confucius did not recognize, or was not concerned with, the realm of the inner person. Schwartz has noted that Confucius was “enormously interested in the inner state of the person” and that the all-important Confucian moral virtue of *ren* in fact presupposes “a capacity of self-awareness and reflection.”¹³ In a similar vein, Kwong-loi Shun has pointed out that Confucius’s core ethical concepts—*tian* 天 (Heaven), *de* 德 (virtue), *ming* 命 (mandate), *ren* (humaneness or benevolence)—denote an increasing emphasis on realms of human life that lie within human control.¹⁴ Erica Brindley has made the issue of moral autonomy a central theme in her discussion of the *Analects*, tracing it in Confucius’s descriptions of Heaven and the exemplary human being.¹⁵ These scholars have proposed, in effect, that the self is a meaningful category for Confucius by positing alternative criteria of determining what a conception of self might be. In the place of Fingarette’s modern psychological categories, Schwartz, Shun, and Brindley propose the criteria of self-awareness, autonomy, and control.

Much of the disagreement stems from scholars’ understanding of the term “self” in vastly diverging ways—and thus, to a certain extent, from their talking past each other. This seems to be fairly unavoidable, given the vast range of issues the term is bound up with and all that is at stake in the discussion. But despite all the complications, I think that we can meaningfully speak of a category of self in the *Analects*, and that it is important to engage in this discussion. There are at least a couple of reasons. First, at the heart of the controversies are some substantive differences in terms of how to characterize the basic ethical orientation of Confucius’s thought (and of early Chinese philosophy more generally). These pertain to fundamental questions of unity, autonomy, and agency. Second,

12. For early critiques of Fingarette’s interpretation, see Charles Wei-hsun Fu, “Fingarette and Munro on Early Confucianism: A Methodological Examination,” *Philosophy East and West* 28, no. 2 (1978): 189–198; Shu-hsien Liu, “Sinological Torque: An Observation,” in the same volume: 199–207; and Chung-ying Cheng, “Dialectic of Confucian Morality and Metaphysics of Man,” *Philosophy East and West* 21, no. 2 (1971): 111–123. Because of the great stakes in this discussion, there have been widely diverging positions not only as to whether or not we can meaningfully attribute some notion of a self to Confucius but also regarding what Fingarette was actually claiming. As Richard Reilly has shown, many of the criticisms leveled against Fingarette have exaggerated the scope of “self-denying” tendencies or have imposed upon him a behaviorist account of Confucius’s moral theory. These misreadings have tended to further polarize positions, leading the discussion in directions that are not always productive. Robert Reilly, “Fingarette on Moral Agency in the *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 4 (2012): 529–544.

13. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 74–75. Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 21.

14. *Ibid.*, 28–29. See also Kwong-loi Shun, “Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, ed. K. L. Shun and David Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 183–202.

15. Erica Brindley, “Moral Autonomy and Individual Sources of Authority in the *Analects*,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 2 (June 2011): 257–273.

a study of Confucius provides an opportunity to explore other possible ways of thinking about what a conception of self might consist of, and thus, of alternative ways of thinking about human ethical possibilities.

I propose that Confucius's most basic claims about the ethical significance of emotions—his emphasis on deep and spontaneous emotions as a defining attribute of the perfected person, his insistence on emotional transparency and authenticity,¹⁶ and his conception of the proper moral life as involving a harmonization of one's desires and duties—sustain a particular ideal vision of the self as characterized by spatial depth, temporal continuity, integrity, and unity. The goal of self-cultivation was to achieve integrity within oneself, and thereby achieve unity with the larger social and community. And the emotions were to play a vital role in this process. Within the self, they opened up a distinct moral space and served as channels through which the inner could be given manifest form, and the outer be brought in line with the inner. And beyond the (albeit permeable) boundaries of the self, they were forces through which inner and outer worlds could impact and penetrate each other. The proper life was one in which disparate—and potentially conflicting—aspects of our individual and collective existence could be integrated and harmonized.¹⁷ The emotions, then, enabled the self to become a node within the larger social and cosmic order.

The unspoken undercurrent of this preoccupation with unity is an anxiety about the threat of disunity—of fragmentation, disintegration, and strife—both in the self and in the world. To this extent, the Confucian vision of the self has some distinct resonances with a conception that emerged in the quite different context—that of the Neoplatonic tradition in Late Antiquity. In an essay devoted to the concept of the self (*autos*) within this tradition, and as epitomized by Plotinus, Henry Chadwick has shown how tightly the concept was bound up with an interest in affirming the ultimate unity of the person in the face of the constant threat of dispersal arising from the soul's bodily entanglements with the material world. It was by retreating from materialism and embracing the idea of a higher, incorporeal realm of a "true" self, that one could lead the soul from its condition of "alarming multiplicity" and restore coherence in the self.¹⁸

The Confucian vision shares with the Neoplatonist one a fundamental concern with the self's unity, and a conception of the proper life as one in which

16. Invoking a term that Stephen Owen has used to characterize the ethical vision of Confucius and the "Confucian" poetic theory that would be so prominent in post-imperial literary traditions in China. See Stephen Owen, "Transparencies: Reading the T'ang Lyric," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39, no. 2 (December 1979): 231–251. I shall further discuss the issue of transparency and its conceptual significance later.

17. The concept of harmony (*he* 和) was also explicitly emphasized in the *Analects* as a value and as an achievement of the *junzi*: The Master said, "The gentleman harmonizes (*he* 和), and does not merely agree (*tong* 同). The petty person agrees, but he does not harmonize" [13.23]; *JCS Lunyu* 13.24/36/11.

18. Henry Chadwick, "Philosophical Tradition and the Self," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 60–81, at 63–64.

this unity can be actualized. But the two seem to be diametrically opposed with respect to the role of emotions in the achievement of the proper life. The Neoplatonist vision involves transcending bodily experience—including the realm of emotions and desires—which it regards as a threat to one's coherence. This process of exclusion is what enables one to disentangle one's higher, "true self" from the downward pull of the body, and ultimately achieve oneness with the divine. It is the task of philosophy to guide the soul back to "the dynamic source of its being" and achieve this state of unity. In contrast to this, Confucian self-cultivation, or *xue* 學, proceeds through one's bodily existence and moves toward an endpoint defined by an ideal condition of perfect integration. The idea that emotions can act as a force of unity rather than of dispersal jars not only with the Neoplatonic view, and with an enduring current in the Western philosophical tradition more generally, but also with some alternative accounts that we find during the Warring States period and beyond, where the emotions are described as forces disruptive of unity in the self, and thus as sources of dispersal.¹⁹

RITUAL AND THE ETHICS OF TRANSPARENCY

If, for Confucius, the ideal human condition was one in which potentially disparate aspects of one's self were reconciled and brought together into a state of harmony, the crucial vehicle for bringing this about was ritual (*li* 禮). At least since Fingarette's discussion of this topic, ritual has been taken more seriously among scholars in the West as a topic of philosophical significance.²⁰ It is no longer assumed that the great importance Confucius accorded to the proper performance of ritual was merely the response of a cultural conservative who sought to restore traditional cultural forms and practices and to defend time-honored moral virtues. Confucius was clearly concerned with reinterpreting these traditions and justifying them in ways that not only challenged prevailing norms and practices but also allowed him to put forward a new ideal of the self and of the human being. Confucius's main concern about ritual was not that people were not practicing it but, rather, that they were not practicing it in the right way. Misappropriated by those who sought to surround themselves with the trappings of dignity, and performed half-heartedly by those who would just as well not perform them, rituals had become ritualistic—meaningless gestures without genuine

19. This theme would be particularly salient in imperial classics commentaries during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang periods (618–907 CE), which stressed that emotions were responses to external stimuli rather than patterned dispositions inherent in our nature. See my discussion of these commentaries in Curie Virág, "That Which Encompasses the Myriad Cares': Subjectivity, Knowledge, and the Ethics of emotion in Tang and Song China" (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2004), ch. 2.

20. Michael Puett has published extensively on this topic. See, most recently, "Constructions of Reality: Metaphysics in the Ritual Traditions of Classical China," in *Chinese Metaphysics and its Problems*, ed. Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 120–129; and "Ritual and Ritual Obligations: Perspectives on Normativity from Classical China," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49, no. 4 (2015): 543–550.

feelings to authenticate them. Confucius's position was that to *truly* perform rituals, one had to infuse them with proper feeling. Performed properly, ritual activity would both confer meaning to one's actions and allow a person to fully come into herself, thereby realizing her full ethical potential as a human being.

That Confucius hailed from the state of Lu 魯 was an important factor in his preoccupation with ritual. In the declining feudal era of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), Lu was one of the states that continued to recognize Zhou sovereignty. Confucius was thus personally committed to supporting the authority of the Zhou Dynasty, and regarded himself as the torchbearer of the continued ritual traditions of the Zhou. Although he claimed that he was merely “transmitting” (*shu* 述) the past, rather than “creating” (*zuo* 作) something new [7.1],²¹ he also recognized that past traditions were not necessarily appropriate for the present, and that they sometimes had to be adapted to fit current, and even individual, circumstances. Such an attitude is itself revealing of Confucius's endeavor to reconceive the meaning and significance of ritual.

Traditionally, the function of ritual ceremonies had been to reinforce one's place within the various social, political, and religious hierarchies in which one was embedded. Confucius rejected this approach and proposed that ritual was about enacting one's virtue—most basically, the virtue of *ren* 仁, or humaneness—and giving tangible form to one's true character and commitments. Indeed, a virtuous character was the very marker of personal attainment. This understanding had a significant impact on emotional values and on ethical discourse more generally. As Yuri Pines has shown, it gave rise to a Confucian emphasis on the emotional dispositions accompanying virtue, as seen in a new concern with the feelings of kindness and compassion in discussions of *ren*.²² Kwong-loi Shun has similarly noted that the new values affirmed by Confucius reflect the emergence of a new “cluster of emotional dispositions and attitudes.” This supplanted the previous emphasis on attitudes of “indebtedness and reverence” that pertained to a ritual culture revolving around sacrificial ceremonies. These new emotional sensibilities were now directed toward the living members of society with whom one engaged in relationships of mutual respect and affection.²³

This development not only redefined the circle of one's community and the norms governing social relationships but it also established emotional authenticity and genuineness as central human values. Such values emerge clearly in Confucius's complaints about the misappropriation of ritual by people of wealth and power. According to Confucius, ritual was, properly speaking, the prerogative of those who had the moral right to practice it. By his time, however, it

21. ICS *Lunyu* 7.1/14/22. On the interpretation of this passage within early debates over the possibility of sagely “creation” and “innovation,” see Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

22. On this, see Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*, esp. ch. 6.

23. Shun, “*Rén* and *Lǐ*,” 67.

had been reduced to nothing but meaningless, outer forms. He was particularly alarmed to learn of people of non-royal lineage, like the upstart leaders of the Ji family, who had taken to performing the rituals of the Zhou kings. Hearing that they had the audacity to have “eight rows of dancers perform in their courtyard”—the ritual prerogative of the Zhou rulers—Confucius exclaimed, “If they can condone this, what are they not capable of!” [3.1].²⁴ In assuming the trappings of kingship, the Ji family was guilty of committing a political transgression, usurping the place of the rightful Zhou rulers. But for Confucius, this was also a moral transgression of the highest order.

Confucius responded to such misappropriations by redefining the meaning of ritual itself. Moreover, he assumed that ritual was not just a matter of great public ceremony but, more generally, also about proper comportment in any situation. In one of the briefest, and seemingly least remarkable, passages in the *Analects*, it is recorded: “He would not sit unless his mat was straight.”²⁵ Such gestures were not irrelevant details. They reflected deep convictions about the correlation between one’s attitudes and beliefs, on the one hand, and one’s bodily conduct, on the other. It was precisely the emphasis on such integration of one’s inner commitments and outer conduct that was the crux of Confucius’s contribution to thinking about ritual—a term that, etymologically and conceptually, is intimately tied to the word for body (*ti* 體).²⁶ The main thrust of Confucius’s new conception was that it needed to be an authentic expression of the person. It was not just a matter of what one did but also how one did it, and rituals were only *truly* ritual if one performed them with genuineness of feeling. To simply conduct oneself properly, so as to conform to external prescriptions, was not enough. As he observed in 3:12: “If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all.”²⁷ A ritual sacrifice was only meaningful insofar as one was “fully there” in a personal sense—with the proper disposition, attitude, and presence of mind.

The ritual conduct associated with filial affection (*xiao* 孝) is a case in point. Here, too, Confucius was proposing a perspective that jarred with prevailing attitudes. Formerly, *xiao* had been concerned with one’s ties and obligations toward one’s larger kinship group, but for Confucius and other members of the *shi* class, it was, first and foremost, about one’s affections and devotion to one’s immediate family. Thus, Confucius noted that, while anyone could go through the motions of being filial to one’s parents, only one who was truly filial would be able to perform these acts sincerely, with genuineness of feeling that could be read in the face (*se* 色):

24. ICS *Lunyu* 3.1/4/25. Cf. *Analects* 3.6.

25. ICS *Lunyu* 10.12/24/25.

26. On this connection, see the discussion in ch. 1, “The Human Body,” in Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 14.

27. ICS *Lunyu* 3.12/5/24.

The Master said, “What is difficult to manage is the expression on one’s face (*se* 色). As for the young taking on the burden when there is work to be done or letting the old enjoy the wine and the food when these are available, that hardly deserves to be called filial.” [2.8]²⁸

Here, Confucius confronts the relationship between inner feeling and outer conduct, and concludes that performing filial actions strictly out of a sense of duty cannot be deemed truly filial. In the immediately preceding passage, he laments that the people of his time understood *xiao* simply as the ability to take care of one’s parents (*neng yang* 能養) in the sense of attending to their physical needs. Confucius found this terribly inadequate, for this kind of care was what one would even show to one’s dogs and horses. Filiality, in his view, was a virtue that involved deep feelings of respect (*jing* 敬) toward one’s parents. In emphasizing the emotional bond between parents and children, Confucius made clear that proper conduct was much more than about carrying out material transactions.²⁹

Confucius’s distress over the moral state of the world was thus largely about the failure of his contemporaries to exhibit the emotions proper to the virtues that were to be sustained through ritual conduct. To perform ritual without the requisite dispositions corresponding to the ritual occasion was cause for severe reproach:

The Master said, “Someone who lacks magnanimity (*bu kuan* 不寬) when occupying high office, who is not respectful (*bu jing* 不敬) when performing ritual, and who remains unmoved by sorrow (*bu ai* 不衰) when overseeing mourning rites—how could I bear to look upon such a person?” [3.26]³⁰

Confucius’s strong language here suggests that not having the emotions that are called for in a ritual occasion—especially if one is in a position of authority—is a moral failure that cannot alleviated by the performance of the ceremonies. Indeed, such a misalignment of the ritual and the feeling is itself a transgression. And in that case, one might as well not perform the ritual at all.

Confucius comes to a similar conclusion in the following exchange with his disciple Zai Wo 宰我 about the ritual of the three-year mourning period for one’s deceased parents:

Zai Wo asked about the three-year mourning period, saying, “Surely one year is long enough. If the gentleman refrains from practicing ritual for three years, the rites will surely fall into ruin; if he refrains from music

28. ICS Lunyu 2.8/3/14–15.

29. Yuri Pines has observed that Confucius’s disciples asked him no fewer than four times what he meant when he referred to *xiao*. Their perplexity on this issue would suggest that Confucius was using the term in an unorthodox way. Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*, 190–199.

30. ICS Lunyu 3.26/7/1.

for three years, this will surely be disastrous for music. After the lapse of a year the old grain has been used up, while the new grain has ripened, and the four different types of tinder have all been drilled in order to rekindle the fire. One year is surely long enough.”

The Master asked, “Would you feel comfortable (*an* 安) then eating your sweet rice and wearing your brocade gowns?”

“I would.”

The Master replied, “Well, if you would feel comfortable doing so, then by all means you should do it. When the gentleman is in mourning, he gets no pleasure from eating sweet foods, finds no joy in listening to music, and feels no comfort in his place of dwelling. This is why he gives up these things. But if you would feel comfortable doing them, then by all means you should!”

After Zai Wo left, the Master remarked, “This shows how lacking in humaneness this Zai Wo is! A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world. Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?” [17.21]³¹

There are multiple tensions here between Zai Wo and Confucius. Zai Wo is concerned with the practical difficulties arising from carrying out the mourning rites for the full three years, and claims that, after one year, he would be capable of resuming the pleasures of ordinary life. Confucius’s response is revealing. He tells Zai Wo that, if that is the case, he should proceed in such a manner and not go through with the proper rites. For to do so, without feeling the necessary grief, would be meaningless.

But there is another important consideration. Confucius’s reproach makes clear that, for all the importance he accords having genuine emotions as the true basis for ritual practice, we are not dealing with subjective determinations of rightness, in the sense that it is up to each person to decide what is the appropriate way to act in a given situation. For Confucius, there are objective criteria for determining the emotions proper to a ritual occasion—in this case, with respect to both the manner and the length of a person’s mourning for his parents. What makes Zai Wo “lacking in humaneness” (*bu ren* 不仁) is his failure to feel sufficient grief to sustain him through the three years’ worth of love and care that he had received early in his life—the amount of time that Confucius thinks is proper based on a certain factual consideration of the reciprocity between parents and offspring. This is an exchange premised on care and affection. The task of ritual is not only to exhibit the respect owed to one’s parents and to other members of one’s community but also to sustain the circulation of such feelings

31. *ICS Lunyu* 17.21/50/1–12.

of care within the familial and social sphere within which one's life is inevitably a part.

Central to Confucius's conception of ritual is the idea that emotions function as an interface between the self and the world. This represents a way of approaching reality that can be found not only in Confucian moral philosophy but also in poetics and medicine. It is part of what we might call an "ethics of transparency," whereby the outer form or expression is taken as a true disclosure of a person's inner state.³² The many passages considered here, testifying to the importance of genuine and spontaneous emotional engagement for authenticating one's ritual actions, presuppose that it is possible to know from the outside what is in the inside. Confucius's complaints about the lack of proper emotions in people assumes that people's faces do not lie, and that the presence of genuine emotions—or lack thereof—is palpable from their expression. One's true character is always visible on the outside because one's feelings are always manifest:

The Master said, "Look at the means a person employs, observe the basis from which he acts, and discover where it is that he feels at ease. Where can he hide? Where can he hide?" [2.10]³³

There is, ultimately, an inexorable outward movement of one's inner feelings toward outer expression, which ensures they are visible in one's demeanor and movements. We are perfectly transparent to others through our feelings. In this sense, our emotions serve an important epistemological function: they are visible signs of who we truly are, and they allow us to become known to others. Through them, the inner becomes outer, the private becomes public, and the concerns of the individual are brought into the world of social relevance.

THE SELF AS A MORAL SPACE

This conception of emotions as the authentic disclosure of a person's inner state has important structural implications. First, it suggests the presence of an inner reality behind the outer expression—a depth beneath the surface of a person that can be plumbed and rendered intelligible. In other words, it brings into view a distinct realm of the self as an intelligible and coherent site of activity—an "inner theater,"

32. This idea would have a tremendous impact on the subsequent shaping of poetics and art theory in China. Stephen Owen has written extensively on this idea, and my interpretation of this aspect of Confucius's thought has been much inspired by Owen's discussions. See Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1992), 19–22; Owen, "Transparencies." Shigehisa Kuriyama discusses this topic in the context of early Chinese medical diagnosis where we find that, in contrast to the ancient Greek perception of the skin as "an occluding screen, blocking insight into underlying forms," the skin was perceived as "the site of privileged revelations." In Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 167.

33. *ICS Lunyu* 2.10/3/19. See Stephen Owen's extensive analysis and interpretation of this passage in Owen, *Readings*, 19–22.

as it were, to invoke the image of Fingarette, though not necessarily with the associations that Fingarette attributed to it.³⁴ Moreover, it suggests an active role for the emotions insofar as they contribute to the spatial integration of the self; indeed, one might say they perform the role of conjuring up, as it were, a space of the self. For, if one considers what one sees as a manifestation of a depth beneath the surface, then the emotions achieve significance as a harbinger of that otherwise impalpable realm that now comes to reveal itself.

The idea of disclosure works through a bifurcation of inner and outer that is then bridged in an ideal of perfect integrity. This is the model of the fully realized individual, as exemplified by the *junzi*. The logic of disclosure is evident in the prevalence of images of surface and depth in Confucius's descriptions of different kinds of individuals, through which he draws attention to the gap between merely conducting oneself like a virtuous person and actually being one. When his disciple Zizhang asks about the qualities of an "excellent person" (*shan ren* 善人), Confucius replies, "If someone seems sincere and serious in conversation, does this mean he is a gentleman? Or has he merely adopted the appearance (*se zhuang* 色莊) of the gentleman?" [11.21].³⁵ In another passage, he stresses that one is truly a morally outstanding person only if one's virtue stands up to "inner examination" (*nei sheng* 內省) [12.4].³⁶

The spatial bifurcation that must be navigated to fulfill one's ethical potential is matched by a temporal extension, which is navigated in time. This temporal extension emerges in the *Analects* in the very idea of self-cultivation, whereby one achieves full realization only as part of a narrative that unfolds in time and that culminates in a state of integration and unity. Here, too, differences with the Neoplatonist account are instructive. For, in stark contrast to the idea of a "divine" core of the "true self," the perfected self posited by Confucius is a work-in-progress that moves toward an ideal of perfect integration. This theme is highlighted by the recurring emphasis on the arduousness of the task of self-cultivation, which is often analogized with various physically demanding endeavors requiring sustained, and often painstaking, effort: carving and polishing stone [1.15]; making an arduous journey [8.7, 9.11], and piling up soil to build a mountain [9.19]. This is the same model of long-term temporal unfolding that we have seen earlier, in the "one-line autobiography" of Confucius, which culminated in the reconciliation of desire with duty at the age of seventy.

To the extent that self-cultivation is envisaged as a process through which the potential disjunction of emotional dispositions with outer conduct can be reconciled, the discourse of emotions in the *Analects* provides a structure for a narrative unfolding of human life, and thus as the basis for the self's temporal

34. Fingarette, "The Problem of the Self," 133.

35. *ICS Lunyu* 11.21/28/7.

36. *ICS Lunyu* 12.4/31/1–3.

continuity. The emotions are an important vehicle for such continuity; there is a way in which an emotion can be deep and total, not only pervading one's entire existence in a given moment, but also enduring beyond the time of the initial response:

The Master would never sing on a day when he had wept. [7.10]³⁷

When the Master was in the state of Qi, he heard the Shao music, and for three months after did not even notice the taste of meat. He said, "I never imagined that music could be so sublime." [7.14]³⁸

Moved by sorrow, Confucius refrains for an entire day from activities that are not in harmony with his feelings. Transported by exquisite music, he remains in a state of rapture for a period of three months. Confucius's capacity to be true to certain emotions, even long after the event that elicited them has passed, is recorded in the *Analects* by his disciples as an exemplary feature of their Master's character. In remaining true to emotions of intense sorrow or of appreciation, Confucius reveals the substance and enduring quality of his character.

That one's emotions help to ensure the self's continuity may seem counter-intuitive. It is very much at odds with certain modern psychological conceptions of emotions, not to mention a number of accounts of emotions that were formulated during the Warring States and Han periods, which conceived of them as momentary disruptions of a state of calmness or neutrality. But it is hardly an unusual or exotic idea. The idea that emotions are ever-present in our engagement with the world, that they give us access to the reality of this world, and that they affect how we configure our selves are important themes in the Phenomenological tradition.³⁹ Among recent scholars, David Pugmire has placed particular emphasis on the self-integrative function of emotions. In *Sound Sentiments. Integrity in the Emotions*, Pugmire observes that all emotional experiences are not the same and should not be treated as such: they can vary considerably in terms of the depth of experience they represent, as well as in their overall value and significance in a person's life. In light of this fact, he proposes that we assess them by way of the criterion of "soundness"—that is, the

37. *ICS Lunyu* 7.10/15/11.

38. *ICS Lunyu* 7.14/15/25.

39. These have been issues of particular importance for Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes extensively on *Stimmung*, or "mood," and its way of not only shaping our perception and understanding of things but also of opening up to us the nature of reality. For a summary of the role of emotions, broadly conceived, in Heidegger's writings, see Anthony Hatzimoyis, "Emotions in Heidegger and Sartre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199235018.003.0010. David Weberman examines Heidegger's account of the role of emotions in revealing, and providing access to, the world, in "Heidegger and the Disclosive Character of the Emotions," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (1996): 379–410.

extent to which “emotions may need to be capable of genuineness, depth and other kinds of integrity.”⁴⁰

Although Pugmire is concerned with how to evaluate and understand emotions as they are experienced, his ideas are highly applicable to conceptions of emotions as well, and they can provide ways of differentiating past theories of emotions. The idea that emotional experiences can be subject to certain objective structural criteria has not been much considered in the Sinological literature on emotions, which tends—as noted earlier—to focus on the normative status of emotions rather than on their phenomenal attributes. However, to discuss a given thinker’s account of the normativity of emotions without paying attention to the broader conceptual vision within which it is situated is of limited value, since debates over emotions are not just about whether they are good or bad, but also about what they are, how they work, and what sphere of life they encompass. The structural qualities of emotions that Pugmire observes are useful because they provide an alternative vocabulary that cuts through the subjective/objective, emotion/reason, and feeling/thinking dichotomies that have pervaded the scholarly discussion of emotions. Bringing out the ways in which emotions implicate the structure of the self, they are highly resonant with the approach to emotions found in the *Analects*.

Extending Pugmire’s account to the present context, I propose that theories of emotions, like emotional experiences, can vary considerably with respect to the degree of “soundness,” “genuineness,” “depth,” and “integrity” associated with them. And that different ways of conceptualizing the emotions in these terms are bound up with ideas about human character. As Pugmire puts it, emotions have greater power, meaning, and intensity for those who possess a greater degree of coherence in their lives:

[T]he shallowness or depth to which a person’s emotions are prone will depend heavily on the degree to which that person’s personality and life are of a piece. The more free-standing and disassociated a person’s several concerns and beliefs are, and the more episodic and unintegrated narratively the events of his life are, the less affective pressure there will be on any one of the parts.⁴¹

Depth of feeling, then, is directly linked to depth in the person. It goes hand in hand with the achievement of an integrated life and with excellence of character. The interest that emotions held for Confucius is bound up with their potential to sustain a particular ideal of self—one characterized by depth, continuity, integrity, and unity.

40. David Pugmire, *Sound Sentiments. Integrity in the Emotions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

41. Pugmire, *Sound Sentiments*, 43.

THE VIRTUE OF EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Envisioning the emotions in this way offers a means for making sense of the considerable ethical significance that Confucius accords to the emotions, without either subjectivizing them entirely or grounding their legitimate expression in some idea of a higher, “rational” will. Confucius did not affirm a generic conception of emotions but, rather, put forward a particular ideal that was very much akin to what Pugmire calls “sound emotions.” As we have seen, it is the depth, intensity, and spontaneity of one’s emotional engagement that is emphasized throughout the *Analects* as a sign of virtue. For Confucius, a capacity for emotional attunement to life’s situations is a basic criterion of moral worth, and having emotions that are characterized by both appropriateness and depth is an essential attribute of the perfected individual. Confucius himself is thus often portrayed as immersed in deep feeling—as transported by grief, joy, or passion for the things he cares about. Often brief and factual, these accounts display Confucius’s virtuous character, and testify to his substance and integrity as a human being.

In the *Analects*, and in the mainstream tradition more generally, special significance is attached to one kind of emotion in particular—that of delight (*le* 樂). We find this emphasis, for instance, in the hierarchy of feelings with which one ought to approach things of true value—things such as learning or the Dao: the deeper and more all-consuming one’s feelings are, the better. As Confucius puts it, “one who knows it (*zhi zhi zhe* 知之者) is not the equal of one who loves it (*hao zhi zhe* 好之者), and one who loves it is not the equal of one who delights in it” (*le zhi zhe* 樂之者) [6.20].⁴² Such feelings of delight are far from the kind of short-lived exuberance brought on by momentary encounters with things in the world. They are, instead, an achievement of one’s character: they can only be experienced by one who has, through her commitment to right living and the masterful exercise of her faculties, successfully integrated the diverse aspects of her existence into a meaningful whole. Such integration is the process by which

42. ICS *Lunyu* 6.20/13/25. In some passages, Confucius appears to subscribe to a narrower sense of virtue. He refers to the *junzi* as one who has successfully overcome his desire for material well-being: “[N]ot motivated by the desire for a full belly or a comfortable abode,” he is “simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them” [1.14; ICS *Lunyu* 1.14/2/12–13]. He refers to a similar standard of restraint when he outlines proper conduct for rulers as follows: “In governing a state of a thousand chariots, be respectful (*jing* 敬) in your handling of affairs and display trustworthiness (*xin* 信); be frugal in your expenditures (*jian yong* 節用) and cherish others (*ai ren* 愛人); and employ the common people only at the proper times (*shi min yi shi* 使民以時)” [1.5; ICS *Lunyu* 1.4/1/14]. In such instances, Confucius seems to be using the term *junzi* in a way that is closer to the earlier sense of superior social and political status, rather than as a designation of moral worth. This usage may reflect the lingering influence of the previous usage, suggesting that Confucius may have been going back and forth between the standards of both. The message for rulers is clearly about self-restraint and not about embodying the virtues of the true sage, as he elaborates elsewhere. He thus emphasizes that rulers must restrain their greed and curb their desire for extravagance; consider the dignity and needs of others even if it means suspending their own immediate interests; and refrain from exploiting the common people in order to finance their own ambitions.

one comes to perfect one's virtue. And the capacity to experience genuine delight is the palpable sign that one has truly arrived.

Accordingly, throughout the *Analects*, the capacity for joy and delight is presented as the purview of individuals who have perfected their virtue in this manner, having achieved full integration of inner and outer by living out their commitments. It is perhaps a testimony to the importance of this idea that the very opening passage of the *Analects* is about the joy (*yue* 說) and delight (*le* 樂) accompanying a life of learning and enriched with friendship:

To learn (*xue* 學) and then have occasion to put it into practice (*xi* 習) is this not a joy (*yue* 說)? To have friends arrive from afar—is this not a pleasure (*le* 樂)? To not be indignant when not recognized by others—is this not the mark of a gentleman (*junzi* 君子)? [1.1]⁴³

What makes learning a delight is not simply the fact that one has succeeded in gaining knowledge of something. It is that, through the practice of what one has learned, one can embody it and put it into practice, thus fulfilling oneself and one's capacities. The feelings of joy and delight that accompany the exercise of one's knowledge and capacities are a sign of true mastery, affirming that one's learning is not just something added to oneself, but pervades one's entire person.

Confucius's exchanges with his disciples suggest that such a proposition was not necessarily in line with conventional views about what moral attainment was about. The on-going discussions of the meaning of *ren*, or humaneness—arguably the most important of the Confucian virtues—are highly revealing in this respect. Despite the observation in 9.1 that *ren* was one of the topics that the Master seldom spoke about, the term is mentioned over a hundred times in the *Analects*.⁴⁴ Many of the passages discussing *ren* feature the Master attempting to explain to his disciples what the concept meant and what it meant for a person to truly live up to it. This suggests a confusion over the meaning of a term that Confucius was approaching in an unconventional way—a term that he sought to infuse with affective content.

One potential source of perplexity involves the dialectical relationship between *li* and *ren*: a person of *ren* always manifests her virtue by acting in accordance with the standards of ritual propriety, and one who properly engages in the rites displays her *ren*. *Ren* might, thus, be understood simply as the inner counterpart to the outer realm of proper comportment as represented by *li*. In this case, *ren*

43. *ICS Lunyu* 1.1/1/3–4.

44. Bruce and Taeko Brooks suggest that the puzzling contradiction between this observation about Confucius and the vast number of quotations that exist in the *Analects* on this topic points to competing redactions of the *Analects* by different schools of disciples who disagreed on the importance of *ren* as a virtue for Confucius. Brooks and Brooks, "Word Philology and Text Philology in *Analects* 9:1," in Bryan W. Van Norden, *Confucius and the Analects*, 163–215. The Brooks's translation of the *Analects* reflects their approach to the text as the product of a long process of accretion. See Brooks and Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

might even be explained in terms of the feelings corresponding to one's activity of properly carrying out one's responsibilities to state and family [12.2].⁴⁵ But often, the emotive aspect is not mentioned at all, and we are left with the impression that *ren* is all about right action. At one point, Confucius defines *ren* as "overcoming the self and returning to ritual propriety" (*ke ji fu li* 克己復禮) [12.1].⁴⁶ Again, when his disciple Yan Yuan asks him how to achieve *ren*, Confucius instructs him to always behave in accordance with the standards of ritual propriety:

Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual propriety; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual propriety; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual propriety; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual propriety. [12.1]⁴⁷

Based on these examples, one might be inclined to conclude that *ren* is to be understood strictly as a matter of self-control through emotional restraint and proper behavioral management.

Self-control, however, is but a stopping point in a long-term process toward the highest ethical goal, which is to become so completely one with the Dao that one fully embodies it in one's desires and feelings.⁴⁸ There are a number of occasions in which Confucius needs to dispel the view that restraining improper feelings and abiding by proper standards of comportment would suffice to establish that a person is truly *ren*. In 14.1, the disciple Xian 憲 asks Confucius if one who suppressed such "shameful" (*chi* 恥) feelings as a sense of competitiveness (*ke* 克), pride (*fa* 伐), resentment (*yuan* 怨), and greed (*yu* 欲) could be deemed a person of *ren*. Confucius replies that, while curbing such negative feelings is indeed difficult, he "does not know" if it is a sufficient condition for *ren*. The real challenge—and the true test of a person's moral worth—is whether one is fully spontaneous and genuine in one's emotions, knowing that they are always appropriate and correct.

This is a point that Confucius's disciples seem to have trouble understanding and must be explained repeatedly. Throughout the *Analects*, the Master's embracement of spontaneous feelings are met with the surprise and occasional disapproval of his more doctrinaire students, creating a recurring tension in the text. The gap in sensibility can be seen in the following exchange between Confucius and his disciple Zizhang 子張 about the character of Prime Minister Ziwen 子文:⁴⁹

Zizhang said, "Prime Minister Ziwen was given three times the post of prime minister, but he never showed a sign of joy (*wu xi se* 無喜色); he

45. ICS Lunyu 12.2/30/24.

46. ICS Lunyu 12.1/30/17.

47. ICS Lunyu 12.1/30/20.

48. Cf. ICS Lunyu 1.15/2/15–19.

49. Zizhang became prime minister of the state of Chu in 663 BCE and was known for his upright character and dedication to the state. *Analects*, trans. Slingerland, 47.

was removed from this office three times, but he never showed a sign of resentment (*wu yun se* 無愠色). When the incoming prime minister took over, he invariably provided him with a complete account of the official state of affairs. What do you make of Prime Minister Ziwen?

The Master said, “He certainly was dutiful (*zhong* 忠).”

“Was he not *ren*?”

“I do not know about that—what makes you think he deserves to be called *ren*? [5.19]⁵⁰

This passage says something important about *ren* by stating clearly what it is not—namely, a capacity to suppress one’s feelings of joy and resentment for the sake of adhering to one’s sense of duty. Zizhang suggests by his question that Prime Minister Ziwen’s capacity for self-control would suffice for designating him a man of *ren*. But for Confucius it was clearly not enough.⁵¹

Quite another matter was a certain Gongshu Wenzi 公叔文子, a man thought to be so principled and restrained that he reportedly “never spoke, never laughed, and never took from others.” When Confucius asked his follower Gongming Jia 公明賈 if such reports were true, the latter replied:

Whoever told you that was exaggerating. My master only spoke when the time was right, and so people never grew impatient listening to him. He only laughed when he was truly delighted (*le* 樂) and so people never tired of hearing him laugh. He only took what was rightfully his, and so people never resented his taking of things.

Whereupon the Master replied incredulously: “Was he like this? Was he really like this?” [14.13]⁵²

Confucius clearly considered Gongshu Wenzi to be a rare example of someone who lived up to his ideal: he responded appropriately to his situation, displayed no false emotion, and—perhaps most important—possessed the capacity for true delight.

Another exemplary figure whose delight invites the Master’s praise is Yan Hui 顏回, the favorite disciple of Confucius. Yan Hui was an impoverished young scholar, living in straitened circumstances while pursuing his studies. What wins him the Master’s admiration is not his dogged pursuit of learning and self-cultivation in the midst of poverty and material hardship. Rather, it is his ability to sustain his delight despite such difficulties:

The Master said, “What a worthy (*xian* 賢) man was [Yan] Hui! Living in a narrow alley, subsisting on a basket of grain and gourdful of water – other

50. *ICS Lunyu* 5.19/10/25–5.19/11/1.

51. The same point can be found in *ICS Lunyu* 14.1/37/3–6.

52. *ICS Lunyu* 14.13/38/9–14.13/38/14.

people could not have borne such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui's delight (*le 樂*). What a worthy man was Hui!" [6.11]⁵³

While a person of ordinary virtue may well devote himself to such a life, only a person of exceptional virtue like Yan Hui could do so while keeping his happiness intact.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, Confucius himself aspires to achieve such delight in his own life. Passage 7.19 records a telling exchange between Confucius and his disciple Zilu 子路, who has just returned from an audience with the duke of She 葉. Zilu tells Confucius that the duke had asked him to describe his teacher for him and that he, not knowing how to reply, had said nothing. Confucius asks, "Why did not you not just say, 'He is the type of man who becomes so impassioned (*fa fen* 發憤) that he forgets to eat, who becomes so full of delight (*le 樂*) that he forgets his worries (*wang you* 忘憂), and who does not notice the coming of old age?' " [7.19].⁵⁵ This exchange provides a telling glimpse of how Confucius wishes to think of himself, and to be portrayed by others. Given the chance to sum up his own qualities as a man, he chooses to focus on his capacity to become so emotionally transported that he becomes impervious to the fact of his own mortality.

These instances of strong emotions go beyond the situation where one loves what one ought to love—learning, the Dao, and so on—which is what Nivison, Schwartz, and Graham have been preoccupied with. For they suggest that Confucius not only thought it was important to care about the right things—things whose value he does not question—but also that he placed utmost value in being emotionally engaged. It was this engagement, rather than a matching of one's emotions to some predetermined idea of a virtue or right practice, that was the ultimate criterion of what it meant to be a perfected individual. Thus, while optimally, one's feelings should be genuine and fully appropriate to a situation, it was perhaps more often than not that reality fell short of this ideal: one performed the proper actions, but one's feelings fell short—or else one went overboard with one's feelings and failed to act appropriately.

There are a number of passages in the *Analects* that confront the possibility of such misalignment. They are of particular interest because they make clear Confucius's own position on this issue, and they also reveal tensions between Confucius and his disciples over what constitutes the appropriate expression of emotions. One such passage is 11.10, where the Master responds to a charge

53. *ICS Lunyu* 6.11/13/3–4.

54. Cf. *ICS Lunyu* 1.15/2/15–19.

55. *ICS Lunyu* 7.19/16/12–13.

of emotional excess regarding his reaction to the death of his favorite disciple, Yan Hui:

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master cried for him excessively (*ku zhi tong* 哭之慟).” The disciples reproved him, saying, “Master, surely you are showing excessive grief (*tong* 慟)!”

The Master replied, “Am I showing excessive grief? Well, for whom *would* I show excessive grief, if not for this man?” [11.10]⁵⁶

Acknowledging that a certain degree of envy and resentment may well have motivated the disciples to chastise the Master in this manner, we might read this passage from the point of view of a basic disagreement between Confucius and his disciples regarding the meaning of moral perfection. For Confucius, doing what is right is very much a matter of feeling one’s way around a situation and acting in accordance with how one feels—even if it puts one at the risk of excess.⁵⁷ For his more rule-bound disciples, by contrast, doing what is appropriate calls for a more strict governance of one’s emotions. And from that point of view, the Master is guilty of over-indulgence. As often tends to be the case, it is the disciples who try to uphold the Master’s teachings in a more doctrinaire manner than he himself, and judge him according to their more rigid understanding.

Whether Confucius might ultimately have judged his own emotional response as excessive or appropriate remains unclear. When his emotions are deemed excessive he does not seem much concerned, either because he does not regard his outpouring of grief to be a serious failure, or because he does not deem it a failure at all. Confucius’s emotional excess is not an aberration from his own avowed principles: at any given moment, one should not *try* to fit one’s feelings and desires with one’s understanding of how one *ought* to behave. That would necessarily compromise the authenticity of one’s feelings and undermine the whole project entirely. And so, there are moments in which all one can do is feel what one feels and simply hope that it will hit the mark.

The possibility of missing the mark is ever-present, and it is precisely this possibility that distinguishes most human beings from true sages—those whose behavior is perfectly appropriate and yet perfectly spontaneous. In missing the mark, Confucius reveals himself to be human, too. This “failure” adds poignancy to the moral perspective of the *Analects*, which acknowledges what human beings

56. *ICS Lunyu* 11.10/27/3–4.

57. Amy Olberding explains the Master’s loss of composure in response to Yan Hui’s death in relation to his views of human flourishing, and of how it depends upon our relations with others. Her approach is insightful in the way that it connects this incident with other dimensions of Confucius’s thought, but the whole episode seems to be far less of a puzzle if we consider it in light of a fuller ethical account of Confucius’s conception of emotions, which reveals that perfect composure is *not* a defining feature of Confucius’s moral ideal. Amy Olberding, “The Consummation of Sorrow: An Analysis of Confucius’s Grief for Yan Hui,” *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 3 (2004): 279–301. On this topic see also Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Death and Dying in the *Analects*,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 1, ed. Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 220–232.

actually are, as much as what they ought to be. It makes the *Analects* more than a detached philosophical exposition with a tidy moral lesson. Confucius seems to have accepted that it was fine and natural to come short of the ideal, so long as one fell short in the right way—that is, toward an excess of emotions rather than toward a deficiency: “When it comes to ritual,” Confucius observed, “it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious” [3.4]. More positively, however, we might say that the failure to align oneself with preset standards may itself be a sign of the depth of one’s commitment, as well as a prerequisite of virtue. It was the very tension posed by such misalignment that drove the process of self-cultivation toward the goal of perfect integration.

EMOTIONS, THE INTEGRATED SELF, AND AGENCY

The structural workings of emotions in the *Analects*, and their contributions to a unified and integrated vision of self, are not just of descriptive interest. They also have distinct normative implications. A conception of the self as temporally and spatially coherent, and of emotions as instantiating value and meaning, were important foundations for a new conception of the self as a locus of moral authority. In affirming the value of emotions as subjectively experienced, Confucius was proposing, in effect, that neither secular authority, nor established social norms, nor even the traditional ritual practices of the Zhou Dynasty could be fully relied upon as sources of moral direction. Instead, these norms had to be authenticated by the promptings of our emotions and desires. To this extent, we can speak of an interiorization of agency and authority within the self.

To be sure, one’s emotions could become authoritative only after one had engaged in a long process of self-cultivation. And we have seen that reaching this point was the long-awaited end point of a lifetime’s journey to achieve integration in oneself. But the process itself was set in motion by the sheer act of willing such a life. Confucius himself, it will be recalled, embarked upon his own path to self-realization when he “set his mind” (*zhi* 志) to this task. This assertion of moral will, however, was more than just a matter of claiming for the subjective realm what had previously been recognized as a matter of conformity to objective norms. It was grounded in the claim to cognitive authority: “When it comes to being *ren* defer to no one, not even your teacher” [15.36].⁵⁸

Confucius supposed, then, that there was reason to think that human beings had access to true understanding of Dao, of what it meant to realize it and how we could achieve it in our own lives. This genuine understanding, as he saw it, was rooted in capacities and experiences located in the self, as it was brought

58. ICS Lunyu 15.36/44/20.

to proper fulfillment. It was, in other words, bound up with the very project of bringing the self into alignment with the Dao. It is here that we see the connection between the structural workings of the emotions in this text and the notion of the self as a normative agent. If, as the “one-line autobiography” makes clear, the true moral accomplishment is to attain a condition of alignment in which emotional fulfillment coincides with doing what one ought properly to do, then it is the very possibility of this integration that confers authority. The authority of the self, both moral and cognitive, lies in the power to bring together and unite into a whole. Indeed, it is quite arguable that, for Confucius, the true meaning of learning itself is the activity of bringing unity and coherence to things. When his disciples ask about the nature of his knowledge, Confucius replies that it does not consist of “knowing by learning many things.” (*duo xue er shi zhi* 多學而識之). Instead, he says, “I bind it all together with a single thread (*yu yi yi guan zhi* 予一以貫之)” [15.3].⁵⁹

My argument that the emotions are a major force of unity in the *Analects*, bringing together parts of oneself and one’s life that might otherwise come apart, is not meant to suggest that Confucius did not recognize the obvious ways in which they could have the opposite effect of compromising the unity of the self. Surely, it was not just the Neoplatonists who were aware of the fact that certain desires, aspirations, and emotions could compete with, and even contradict, what we might, in our better judgment, consider to be “higher” and more worthy goals and values.⁶⁰ Indeed, Confucius’s concern with restoring the true meaning of ritual, and with getting people to live up to the rituals they performed, was undoubtedly prompted by a sense of moral and cultural crisis arising from his perception that his contemporaries failed to restrain their emotions and desires. It was this, arguably, that had led to the collapse of the Zhou Dynasty feudal order, and the concomitant disruption of traditional hierarchies, practices, and norms. The ethical turn represented by thinkers like Confucius—as well as the early critics of the Confucian tradition, both inside and outside the mainstream

59. *ICS Lunyu* 15.3/42/4–5. There are competing theories as to what *yi guan zhi* means. Huang Kan 黃侃 (488–545 CE) reads the term as a metaphor: everything that the Master teaches is unified theoretically by one principle, like objects strung on a single thread. Slingerland argues that the *Analects*’ emphasis on practice over theory makes it likely that the “single thread” is a kind of consistency in action rather than a unified theoretical principle. Slingerland draws a similar conclusion in his translation and commentary; see *Analects*, 175. I would argue for a less strict division between theory and practice, and emphasize the importance of the *idea* of a unifying perspective for Confucius.

60. Thus, for instance, despite the fact that one of the important attributes of the perfected person was a capacity for genuine pleasure (*le* 樂), this was premised on the assumption that such pleasures were occasioned by the right kinds of things and were properly directed. In 16.5, Confucius delineates different types of pleasures: those that are beneficial (*yi* 益) and those that are harmful (*sun* 損). Among the beneficial pleasures are: “regulating yourself through the rites and music,” “commending the excellence of others,” and “possessing many worthy friends.” Among the harmful ones are engaging in “arrogant behavior,” “idle amusements,” and “decadent licentiousness.” A similarly “correct” Confucius also emerges in 18.4, when he reportedly left the state of Lu because its ruler, having received a gift of female musicians from the people of Qi, suspended court for three days, presumably to indulge in various forms of pleasure of which Confucius disapproved.

tradition—can be persuasively read as addressing the emotional excesses that brought about the problems of the world—warfare, violence, and widespread misery.

One obvious solution—and one that was often proposed during the Warring States period and afterwards—might be to advocate the suppression of one's feelings and desires in the name of living up to a purer, and more transcendent, ideal of virtue. This was not Confucius's way, nor was it the way pursued by the mainstream thinkers. For Confucius, the solution was a kind of middle path that recognized both the normativity of certain spontaneous emotions as authoritative and valuable in themselves, and the need to direct and give proper form to one's emotions so as to channel them toward the right ends. The potential tensions between these two positions vis-à-vis the emotions and desires are plain to see, and in the *Analects* itself we find statements attributed to Confucius that seem to unambiguously support one or other approach. But the genuineness of these tensions notwithstanding, the manner in which Confucius sought to address the crisis of his times was to advocate a certain vision of what human emotions ought to be like. The highest form of life was one in which the emotional fulfillment of the individual could sustain the order and well-being of society. Individual and collective well-being were not only reconcilable, but fully sustained one another.

The choice, then, was not between satisfying one's emotions (subjective, internal) versus adhering to duty (objective, external), but between a properly fulfilled, integrated life that was appropriate to one's situation in the world versus a life that failed to realize such a life. The difference between the two was a matter of having emotions that achieved a certain quality. When Confucius maps his own moral progress from the age of fifteen and claims that, at the age of seventy, he could "follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety," we can say that, from Confucius's point of view, his true self has come into realization. He has attained the ultimate ethical goal of overcoming the distance between his desires and his sense of rightness, spontaneity, and duty. This is not a balance and a compromise, but the integration and full actualization of one's personal fulfillment with self-transcendent notions of truth and value. The joy and delight that accompanied such a condition was the true sign that one's virtue did not merely remain at the level of gestures, but pervaded one's entire person.

CONCLUSION

Confucius's vision of the perfected individual as one who has achieved emotional fulfillment and the full realization of her desires, signals more than the idea that the emotions are somehow ethically significant. That the emotions, properly realized, possessed depth, spontaneity, and fullness of expression points to a distinct ideal of self as characterized by continuity, coherence, and integrity. The

emotions thus played a vital structural role in opening up the space of the self and acting as a force of unity that could bring together and harmonize the potentially disparate parts of one's life—inner feelings and outer conduct, the self and the larger world. Moreover, in their role as an interface between inner and outer worlds, the emotions were also crucial for establishing the possibility of human agency: they were both a source of knowledge about the world and a site of moral potency: they furnished the impetus for unity and integration by guiding the individual on a path toward the optimal realization of one's human potential. The achievement of moral perfection thus ultimately began with a desire located within the self. As Confucius observed, “Is *ren* really so far away? If I simply desire *ren*, I will find that it is already here” [7.30].⁶¹

Confucius's approach to the emotions in the *Analects* represents a major reorientation in the very conception of self and the ethical life—one that prefigures the more full-fledged naturalistic accounts of the fourth century BCE. Although Confucius did not, like his Warring States counterparts, elaborate any theories about the inherent dispositions or inclinations of things (*qing* 情)—human or cosmic—or about the innate of human beings (*xing* 性),⁶² his basic orientation toward the emotions, as well as his ideal conception of the self, would be shared by later thinkers of the mainstream tradition. The idea that the emotions and desires possessed an optimal form of realization and fulfillment; that in their proper realization they were a force of unity, coherence, and integrity; that they represented an important source of knowledge about the world—these were all themes that would be discernible in the ethical thought of later mainstream thinkers, regardless of whether they would be later classified as “Daoist” or “Confucian.” Finally, all were united in the idea that the emotions, grounding both moral and cognitive authority, represented an important basis for a special form of human agency, one in which the personal project of bringing the self to its proper fulfillment was premised on the capacity to intuit the workings of reality, and to achieve full alignment with this reality. Mastering oneself, achieving efficacious power, and harmonizing with the broader conditions of the world were endeavors that were not only reconcilable but also interdependent with one another.

61. *ICS Lunyu* 7.30/17/12.

62. Although these terms do occur on a few occasions, they possess none of the psychological or cosmic implications that we will find just a century later. The first term appears twice, in chapters 13 and 19 (*ICS Lunyu* 13.4/34/8; *ICS Lunyu* 19.19/55/20–21), in neither instance with any emotive or naturalistic significance. The second is invoked in two brief passages in chapters 5 and 17. In the first, it is observed by Confucius's disciple Zigong that the Master does not speak about *xing* or about the higher cosmic order (*tian dao* 天道), preferring to discuss patterned conduct (*wenzhang* 文章). The second passage quotes the Master himself declaring: “By nature (*xing* 性), people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice (*xi* 習)” [*ICS Lunyu* 17.2/47/27].

Reasons to Care

Redefining the Human Community in Mozi

Mozi 墨子 (Mo Di 墨翟, c. 480–390 BCE) was the first major critic of Confucius, as far as we know, and the founder of a philosophical tradition that has come to be known as Mohism. The text we recognize as the *Mozi* represents the accumulation of what are considered to be the teachings of Master Mo as compiled by generations of disciples.¹ It is the earliest surviving Chinese text that takes the form of an argumentative treatise, is organized into sections and chapters, and is designed to drive home certain key points that are essential to its larger ethical and political vision. The “core chapters” (chapters 8–37), which are believed to represent Mozi’s own teachings or teachings based on ideas originating directly from him, are about the ultimate purpose of government, the means by which this purpose is to be realized, and the proper relationship between human and heavenly affairs. The later chapters deal with technical subjects seldom explored by early Chinese thinkers, such as semantics, mathematics, mechanics, and optics.² Taken together, the various topical layers of the *Mozi* fill out our perspective on the landscape of early thought and intellectual development, showing a more diverse repertoire of concerns, as well as a significantly different conceptual orientation and ethical vision, from what has become familiar to us as the early mainstream tradition.

Like Confucius, Mozi traced the basic problems of the world to unrestrained human emotions and desires, and proposed that solving these problems required properly directing these emotions and desires in a way that was beneficial to others. However, there were vast differences in their approaches. While Confucius held that emotional dispositions could become reliable sources of moral direction if developed properly, and thus occupied himself with the issue of what it meant to cultivate these dispositions, Mozi did not explore the normative potential of emotional inclinations as such. Instead, he sought to identify absolute

1. For a succinct discussion of the textual history of Mohist writings, see the supplement, “Texts and Authorship” to Chris Fraser’s entry on “Mohism” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

2. See A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1978); also Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 137–169.

and unchanging norms that could guide our actions, and emphasized reasoned reflection as the proper procedure for reaching right conclusions about things. It was through arriving at, and putting into practice, what was right (*yi* 義), in an objective and universal sense, that a viable social and political order could be achieved. Mozi thus offered a fundamentally different account of how we ought to go about solving the problems of the world and what the proper guidelines for reforming society ought to be.

According to Mozi, all the calamities of the world—violence, warfare, famine, misery, and poverty—could be boiled down to a structural problem in the workings of human inclinations—namely, a basic tendency toward partiality, or *bie* 別. People were dispositionally inclined to benefit (*li* 利) themselves at the expense of others, and to benefit one's own at the expense of those outside one's own affective community. They tended to pursue their own pleasures and profits rather than to act in the interests of society as a whole. Left to their own devices, people would tear the world apart through their competition for personal gain. Mozi's point, however, was not just that people should act differently, in accordance with the principle of benefiting others and not causing harm (*hai* 害); they should *feel* differently as well. Overcoming their natural inclination toward partiality, they should extend their caring to everyone. This was Mozi's famous doctrine of *jian ai* 兼愛, or impartial caring.³

Much of the scholarly discussion pertaining to Mozi's notion of *jian ai* has focused on its underlying moral psychology, and specifically, on what is presumably its most basic shortcoming—namely, Mozi's remarkably simple-minded expectation that self-interested people could be persuaded to care about everyone equally. Mozi's philosophy, then, seems to rest on a rather implausible account of how human beings actually operate, and strains what one could reasonably expect from people. After all, it is one thing to get people to accept a certain good as desirable and quite another to actually desire that good.

It is, indeed, the case that Mozi does not offer much by way of a moral psychological theory. He does not seem to be much preoccupied with the difficulty of getting one's feelings to cooperate with one's reasoned judgments—a major topic of concern within the Chinese philosophical tradition. However, I would submit that the very attention to Mozi's moral psychology might be misplaced. There is no pressing reason to fixate on this issue, simply because the problem itself was not a central priority in Mozi's thought. Arguably, the most significant and interesting feature of Mozi's philosophical vision lies elsewhere, in the very fact of his claim that we *should* care about the plight of our fellow people, irrespective

3. Here I follow the rendering proposed by P. J. Ivanhoe, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. P. J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 60. Kwong-loi Shun follows A. C. Graham in translating *ai* as "concern" but opts for "indiscriminate concern for each." Shun, however, notes that *ai* in Mozi's usage need not exclude the emotions, since it could "involve reacting affectively in response to negative conditions of the objects of concern." Shun, *Mencius*, 31.

of their personal connections to us. Mozi's indictment of his contemporaries for not caring about those beyond their personal communities, then, is itself a highly significant fact: it points to Mozi's sense of a fissure in the moral economy—one in which the reigning affective norms and practices, which exclusively embrace those within one's own familial and personal network, fail to encompass the greater community to which we have moral obligations. In advocating that it is this larger community that represents the proper domain of our concern, Mozi gives voice to the idea of the human being as a universal category.

Framed within this context, Mozi's argument for *jian ai* assumes different contours. It shows Mozi not as an extreme voluntarist and a psychologically naïve philosopher who is so out of touch with how human beings actually are that he thinks people can simply change how they feel by sheer rational will. Instead, it gives us grounds to consider Mozi as a compassionate thinker who confronts the spectacle—familiar to us in our contemporary world—of inhumanity among his fellow human beings, and tries to do something about it. Rather than interpreting Mozi as *failing* to recognize the importance of natural human ways of feeling, we might in fact read Mozi as *appreciating* these ways of feeling, and as thus driven by the ambition to extend one's charity and care toward a larger human community. It is also within this move to envision all people as part of a broader human community that Mozi's epistemology assumes greater significance. Mozi's appeal to the authority of “standards and models” (*fayi* 法儀) does not necessarily mean, as some have claimed, that knowledge is a matter of applying, and conforming to, external standards. I argue, instead, that Mozi regards human beings as possessing certain basic cognitive abilities that enable them to draw sound and logical conclusions from premises, and to arrive at the right course of action. When he offers reasons to care about people we don't know, he is invoking reasons whose soundness will presumably be appreciated by all people. In his move to attribute greater cognitive agency to human beings, Mozi is attempting to show that people are basically same and equal (*tong* 同), by virtue of certain intrinsic and shared capacities that they all have in common.⁴

THE PROBLEM WITH HUMAN INCLINATIONS

Mozi approaches the practical problems of his day both comprehensively and analytically. In one of the chapters on “impartial caring,” he confronts the world from a bird's-eye perspective, observing the various harms (*hai* 害) that afflict the world—the way in which large states attack the small, the strong oppress the weak, the noble disdain the poor, and the clever deceive the simple. Alongside

4. This is a striking contrast to Confucius's explicit rejection of the ethics of sameness in favor of one based on harmonization (*he* 和). In the latter, the proper community is a coming together of discrete individuals who could, in their mutual interactions, realize themselves both individually and collectively.

these he also notes the absence of proper feelings of respect and affection among the people: rulers displaying no benevolence (*hui* 惠), subjects showing no loyalty (*zhong* 忠), fathers having no affection (*ci* 慈), children feeling no filiality (*xiao* 孝). Inquiring into the sources of all of this dysfunction, Mozi identifies a root cause:

If we try to understand the origin of these various harms, whence have they arisen? Have they arisen from people caring about (*ai* 愛) and providing for (*li* 利) others? Certainly we must say that this not the case. Instead, we must say that it comes from people hating (*e* 惡) and stealing from (*zei* 賊) others. If we were to characterize those who hate and steal from others, would we say that they are impartial (*jian* 兼) or partial (*bie* 別)? Certainly we must say that they are partial. Thus it is that those who are partial in their interactions with others ultimately bring about the great harms of the world. This is why partiality is wrong.⁵

The basic problem, as outlined here, is that people do not care about (*ai* 愛) and benefit (*li* 利) each other, but instead, hate (*e* 惡) and steal from (*zei* 賊) each other. But this situation, too, has its origins in a more basic fact about human beings—namely, their tendency toward partiality (*bie* 別). People are naturally inclined to care more about themselves than about others, and more about people they have personal ties with than those with whom they have none. Left to their own devices, human inclinations move in such a way that they pursue what is of benefit to oneself at the expense of others, and what is of benefit to one's own at the expense of society at large.

In contrast to Confucius, who had assumed that the bonds of affection cultivated within close personal relationships radiated outward to the larger social community, Mozi recognized a clear conflict between caring for oneself and caring for others. Indeed, the caring arising from spontaneous feelings was often a zero-sum game: if you followed your inclinations to care only about yourself, you could not care about your father, or your brother, or your ruler, or anyone else; nor were you capable of acting in the interest of others. This being the case, multiple subjectivities did not come together to form a harmonious society; on the contrary, they led to a situation of chaos and disorder. This, Mozi explained, was the situation that existed “at the beginning of human life”—that is, in the state of

5. Source passages from the *Mozi* refer to chapter and line numbers from the following edition: *A Concordance to the Mozi* (*Mozi yinde* 墨子引得), Harvard-Yenching Institute, Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), hereafter abbreviated as *Mozi yinde*. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. There exist a number of complete and partial translations of the *Mozi*, which I have consulted. These include: *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*, trans. Yibao Mei (London: Probsthain, 1929); *Mozi: A Complete Translation*, trans. Ian Johnston (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and “Mozi,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005). The above passage is from *Mozi yinde* 14/11/1–5.

nature before civilization, laws, and government had been created. During this time, the governing morality was “everyone according to his own idea of rightness” (*yi* 義):

If there was one person, there was one conception of rightness; if there were two people, there were two different conceptions, and if there were ten people, there were ten different conceptions. The more people, the more conceptions of rightness. Since people approved of their own conceptions and rejected those of others, mutual condemnation resulted. Because of this, within the home, resentment and hatred arose between father and son, older brother and younger brother. Unable to agree on anything, they became estranged from one another. As for the common people of the world, they used water and fire, poison and drugs to destroy and injure each other. The situation reached a point that surplus energy was not deployed for assisting each other in their labors; goods were left to rot and smell without being shared; and true teachings were left hidden without being taught to each other. The disorder of the world was like that among the birds and beasts. [11.1]⁶

As Mozi makes clear here, the problem underlying all the chaos, enmity, and harm that were rampant in the world was the sheer fact that there were no shared norms based on a common standard, but simply individual, self-referential norms arising from people’s partial inclinations and preferences. This is what led rulers to make bad policy decisions—decisions that not only hurt the state but also worked against their own best interests. In appointing officials, for instance, rulers routinely went against the most obvious and rational course of action, which was to hire the most competent person to perform the task at hand. Instead, they followed their partial inclination to choose people they liked, based on their personal connection to them, or on their personal charm and attractiveness. These often overrode considerations of competence and ability, which ought to be the decisive criteria.

Both Confucius and Mozi would have considered the promotion of a state counselor on the basis of charm or good looks as a case of succumbing to one’s immediate desires, rather than acting in accordance with what was right. But for Mozi, the failure was not only moral, based on a disregard for the good of others and for virtuous government; it was also cognitive. When rulers, blinded by their desires and affection, did not exercise their capacity to make right decisions, they were on the wrong side of an epistemological divide. Theirs was a failure to perceive, properly and fully, the larger reality within which they operated and the radiating repercussions of their own actions. This failure of perception

6. *Mozi yinde* 14/11/1–5.

threatened the possibility of justice, social stability, and political order, and dispersed any chance of realizing a condition of harmonious interaction, even within one's own family.

This did not mean, however, that it was necessary to relinquish self-interested desires and aspirations and to embrace altruism, or that we should replace our particularist ties with universalist ones. A basic premise of the Mohist moral and political vision was precisely that certain human inclinations were natural and universal, and that it was the task of the ruler to ensure that they be recognized and satisfied. The political goal of creating an orderly and prosperous realm presupposed that the role of the state was to care for the people. Moreover, Mozi is explicit in pointing out that the very task of the ruler was to respond to the wishes and desires of the people, and that his success in doing so was a prerequisite to political and social order: "When the administration of those above answers to the emotional dispositions (*qing* 情) of the people, there is order (*zhi* 治); if it does not answer to the emotional dispositions of the people, there is disorder (*luan* 亂)" [13.1].⁷ Mozi proceeds from the assumption that people's emotional dispositions are such that they desire material well-being: rulers desire that their domains be wealthy, while the common people desire to live in a state of peace and comfort, with sufficient food, clothing, and shelter. Since such desires are a perfectly natural and unavoidable part of human life, rather than trying to ignore or deny their existence, one should recognize them for what they are and try to bring about a society in which they could be properly satisfied.

The problem with our inclinations, however, is that when they arise from our unreflected concern for ourselves, they cause harm to others and, eventually, to ourselves. One of Mozi's examples of this is the elaborate music and funerary practices of the elite. When rulers adorn themselves with dazzling, elaborately embroidered clothing and have themselves transported in finely carved carriages and boats, they spread misery and suffering by extracting precious resources from the toiling masses. This is why the ancient sage-kings promulgated laws commanding artisans to stop producing goods when they had satisfied the needs of the people. This prevented them from producing extravagant and wasteful luxury items [21.2]. There was also a code regulating the consumption of food and drink:

When it is enough to satisfy one's hunger and maintain one's energy, strengthen one's legs and arms, and make one's eyes and ears perceptive and clear, then stop. Do not go to extremes to combine the five flavors and harmonize fragrances, and do not seek out exotic delicacies from distant countries. [21.3]⁸

7. *Mozi yinde* 19/13/2–3.

8. *Mozi yinde* 35/21/5–6. The second sentence preserves the wording of Mei's translation.

Such laws to check the voracious desires of people of wealth and privilege were necessary for ensuring that the production of goods was kept within reason and did not cause harm to the populace.

In the absence of a sufficiently powerful political authority that could check the unbridled desires of the rulers of his day, Mozi appealed to another authority: that of an impartial, all-knowing beneficent being who looked out for the well-being of all people. This was the perspective that Mozi ultimately attributed to “Heaven” (*tian* 天). Whether or not Mozi was “religious” and truly believed in the existence of such an active, transcendent deity is rather beside the point.⁹ As Mozi conceives of it, Heaven is an anthropomorphic entity that possesses an active interest in human affairs and that seems to possess emotions as well, insofar as it “desires” and “hates” certain kinds of outcomes. But Heaven desires and hates differently from humans in that it does so impartially, in such a way that it considers the well-being of all people equally and strives to benefit (*li* 利) them equally.

Although much has been made of Heaven’s role as a dispenser of rewards and punishments, especially in the context of discussions about Mozi’s theory of motivation, I propose that the true significance of Heaven lies elsewhere—in its role as a model for human beings. Insofar as Heaven represents an all-knowing, transcendent, and beneficent entity, it points to the possibility of human beings assuming objective, impartial vantage point. To have Heaven as one’s model is different from modeling oneself on a person or a set of rules. It is not about conforming to a fixed standard or obeying Heaven’s commands, but about being Heaven-like in one’s perceptions and actions. It is about stepping out of relational criteria for judging right and wrong, or good and bad, and properly grasping the situation at hand. The central implication of Mozi’s conception of Heaven, then, is not that human beings occupy a subordinate position of obedience and conformity, but that they can aspire to higher and more objective understanding of things through the exercise of their cognitive ability.

It is the normativity of the vantage point of Heaven that furnishes the necessary context for understanding Mozi’s approach to human inclinations and emotions, and his famous doctrine of *jian ai*, or impartial caring. Heaven’s underlying

9. There has been a fairly vigorous debate over whether Mozi cites as his ultimate justification the authority of Heaven or utilitarian criteria. This debate was spawned by Dennis Ahern, who questioned the standard characterization of Mozi as a utilitarian by drawing attention to the appeal to Heaven’s will. Dennis Ahern, “Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian?” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1976): 185–193. Daniel M. Johnson examines this debate and argues that there is more textual evidence to support the authority of Heaven’s will, which he refers to as a “divine will theory.” Daniel M. Johnson, “Mozi’s Moral Theory: Breaking the Hermeneutical Stalemate,” *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 2 (2011): 347–364. Although the *Mozi* attributes some anthropomorphic qualities to Heaven as a supernatural force that rewards and punishes human beings, in the context of this discussion of Mozi’s account of human knowing and judgment, I think the main significance of the appeal to Heaven lies not in its possible “religious” significance, but in the fact that it represents the kind of reasoned, objective perspective that Mozi thinks human beings ought to adopt.

character is to be broad and comprehensive: its activities are “all-encompassing and impartial,” its blessings are “generous and unceasing,” and its intelligence (*ming* 明) is constant and undiminishing.” To be Heaven-like is to adopt this all-embracing perspective and to be impartial in our caring—in effect, to practice *jian ai*. As Mozi explains it, to practice *jian ai* is “to regard the state of others as one’s own state,” “the families of others as one’s own family,” and “the persons of others as one’s own person,” “the houses of others as one’s own, the persons of others as one’s self” [14.4].¹⁰ By extending our affections outward to all people, our partial and self-destructive tendency to care only about ourselves can be transformed into an impartial caring that benefits the entire world.

UNIVERSAL LOVE? ON THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF MOZI’S MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Mozi’s proposal for solving the problems of the world—that we should all try to be impartial in our feelings and care for all people—has been met with a fair amount of derision by scholars in the past. Much has been made of the psychological implausibility of Mozi’s claims and the extreme voluntarism that it suggests. Does Mozi seriously think that we can simply transition from realizing that something is true and proper to having emotions that correspond to this realization? That changing our feelings about things is just a matter of right thinking, and that we could just reason our way toward caring for all people impartially? In part because of his failure to explain just how people could be persuaded to change their normal habits of feeling and to feel compassion toward all, scholars of early Chinese philosophy have long questioned whether the Mohists had any philosophically significant insights to offer. Wing-tsit Chan, writing four decades ago, reveals something of the prevailing attitude when he dismissed the entire Mohist school as philosophically “shallow and unimportant” and having little of substance to contribute to an otherwise vibrant philosophical tradition. While a revival of Mozi and the Mohist tradition has been under way in the past decade,¹¹ there remains the basic problem of what many scholars have regarded as rather untenable features of Mohist thought.

One of the main objections to Mohist thought among contemporary scholars has been its presumed failure to consider the basic workings of human psychology and emotions. The idea that one could, out of a concern for the good of all, change one’s emotions from a partial concern for one’s own to an impartial concern for all people strains what one might reasonably expect of human beings. This is a criticism that has been levied most directly against the

10. *Mozi yinde* 22/14/12–26.

11. See Franklin Perkins, “Introduction: Reconsidering the Mozi,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (Special Issue on Mozi, September 2008): 455–471.

Mohist doctrine of *jian ai* 兼愛. One way out of the dilemma is the proposal by A. C. Graham that the *ai* 愛 of *jian ai* has, in fact, nothing to do with love or any sort of emotion at all, but is, rather, an “unemotional will to benefit and avoid harming people.”¹² But this seems rather strained, and while this solution would alleviate some of the implausibility of Mozi’s proposition, there are sufficient grounds for interpreting *jian ai* as possessing a strong emotional valence. The translation adopted here, “impartial caring,” represents a toning down of the affective dimension from the older rendering, “universal love,”¹³ but maintains a decidedly affective tone. I believe this is justified, given that the very framework of the entire discussion rests on an opposition between partiality and impartiality and, given Mozi’s way of contrasting *ai* with *wu* 惡, are both matters of inclination. *Jian ai* possesses a spectrum of meanings in the text, from strong affection to a more detached concern for the well-being of others. Mozi’s references to *ai* in terms of *xiao* 孝 (filial affection) and *ci* 慈 (benevolent affection) in 14.1, for example, clearly denotes affective bonds that are considered normative and that therefore ought to be extended to all people.

Another way in which scholars have sought to fill in the explanatory gap has been to emphasize the importance of self-interest as a motivating force behind the imperative to care for others. This reading has sustained the label of Mozi as a “utilitarian” thinker.¹⁴ The claim is that, for Mozi, self-interest is the most important, or even sole, motivation for human action. This could explain how people who are fundamentally self-interested could be persuaded to care impartially about all people: all that is necessary is to get them to realize that it is in their personal interest to practice impartial care. Zeroing in on the voluntarist implications of this idea, David Nivison has emphasized that *jian ai* is not only about modifying one’s actions but also about changing one’s feelings in accordance with “the desire to optimize material satisfaction.” As Nivison reconstructs Mozi’s argument:

Mozi appeared to think that if you can get people to follow a properly constructed argument implying that it would be in their rational interest for them to have certain affections (and beliefs, for that matter), then they will conclude that they should have those affections, and can at that point if they will (and they are simply perverse if they don’t) proceed to adopt them, just as they might decide, on persuasion, to move their limbs.¹⁵

12. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 31–32.

13. See, e.g., Mozi: *Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and *Ethical and Political Works*, trans. Mei.

14. See, e.g., Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 151, and Chris Fraser, “Moism and Self-Interest,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (2008): 437–454, at 438.

15. Nivison, “Weakness of Will,” 83.

Nivison regards Mozi's easy transition from willing to feeling as a rather "bizarre" feature of his thinking—as part of a crude theory that fails to consider the psychological workings of human beings. Mozi does not problematize what one would normally expect to be problematized. There is, for Mozi, "no problem of inner psychic restructuring or nurturing needed to make a person morally perfect. In effect he assumes this: a person is kind of rational calculator, unless he or she is just intellectually mixed up."¹⁶ There is, then, a major gap in Mozi's argument, which is an account of how the affective restructuring is to take place—a gap that is all the more glaring given that the Confucian tradition has been devoted to explaining, and justifying, precisely this process of affective restructuring and providing an account of self-cultivation that centers on this process.

I would generally agree that Mozi tends rather to assume, rather than explain, that people will be motivated to care about others if they looked at things in the right way. However, the voluntarist model that Nivison presents, and the utilitarian reading of Mozi's vision more generally, does not entirely do justice to Mozi's thought. First, as Chris Fraser has argued, self-interest was just one of a bundle of many important sources of motivation: it was "at most only an auxiliary motivation, since they assume people will generally be motivated on moral grounds."¹⁷ This offers, I think, a much more plausible reading of the reasoning behind the Mohist vision. Broadening the scope of motivation in this way, to be sure, still leaves us with the problem of how to make the transition from believing that something is good and right to genuinely caring about people one doesn't know. This will be discussed in a later section.

Second, fixating on the voluntarism of Mozi's thought makes the whole package of Mohist thinking appear more far-fetched than it actually is. It pays disproportionate attention to an extreme possibility of reading *jian ai* as a claim that one can control one's emotions at will. And it ignores the fact, stressed by Dan Robins and Chris Fraser, that despite the strong communitarian aspect of *jian ai*, it does not call for the abandonment of the ties of affection that one feels toward those who are close to us.¹⁸ Third, it ascribes a too stark dichotomy between reason and feeling, and reads a stronger opposition between them than is warranted. Such a dichotomy is based on an untenable claim that we might call "rationality" is exclusively directed toward the furthering of self-interest, and that self-interested rationality should genuinely motivate people to feel differently. In fact, however, if we take seriously Mozi's claim that we should be concerned with what is simply the right thing to do (*yi*), then it is much less difficult to imagine that people

16. Ibid.

17. See Fraser, "Moism and Self-Interest," 438.

18. Chris Fraser, "Mohism and Motivation," in *Ethics in Early China. An Anthology*, ed. Chris Fraser, Dan Robins, and Timothy O'Leary (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 86–88. Dan Robins, "Mohist Care," *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 1 (2012): 60–91.

could interpret their feelings differently and learn to extend their capacity to care for the plight of others. And fourth, Mozi does assume a number of “nonrational” forms of motivation that significantly moderate the voluntarist stance, such as the desire to conform to one’s superior.¹⁹

To a certain extent, the general failure among scholars to properly understand the rather complex picture of motivation in the *Mozi* can be largely attributed to the fact that the Confucian model of moral psychology is taken as the norm. If we take that model as our reference point, then the Mohist theory cannot but appear primitive and psychologically naïve, at best.²⁰ We might gain a fuller appreciation of Mozi’s ethical thought if we shift the focus away from the psychological problem of motivation—about which the Mohists did not have much to say—and consider it in view of the Mohist conception of personhood. I believe this offers a more meaningful basis upon which to compare the Mohist and Confucian traditions, and to consider the real contributions of Mohist thinking.

The Confucian vision, as we have seen, approaches the self as part of a long-term temporal trajectory that assumes direction, continuity, and meaning through self-cultivation. Nivison’s criticism is interesting in this respect because it does not differentiate Mozi from the Confucians on the basis of its voluntarism. In fact, it is precisely the voluntarism of Mozi’s thought that unites it with the thinking of Confucius and Mencius:

I suggest that Confucius, Mozi, and Mencius are in one way all heading in the same direction. All seem to assume that various sorts of things one could do—pursue the Way, practice universal love, govern benevolently—require appropriate dispositions, and that one can simply choose to use (effectively have) these dispositions or not. So, if we think of these dispositions as part of ourselves, we must also think of there being in the self, so to speak, a sort of control tower that can activate them, perhaps as one might flip a switch—a core of the self that is radically free to choose.²¹

Nivison concludes that all three thinkers assume the existence of a “control tower” that can turn the emotions and dispositions on and off, and that can presumably alter them as well. What differentiated them was the fact that, while Confucius and Mencius offered an account of how the emotions could be brought in line with one’s will through a process of self-cultivation, Mozi failed to do so. Apparently proceeding from the same premises as the Confucian vision, Mozi’s account possessed a huge and glaring gap—a hole where a theory of self-cultivation should be.

19. For a more extensive examination of the many sources of motivation in the *Mozi*, see Fraser, “Mohism and Motivation.”

20. Fraser makes this observation as well, in “Mohism and Motivation,” 83.

21. Nivison, “Weakness of Will,” 84.

As I see it, the critical difference between Confucius and Mozi lies not in the latter's failure to provide a persuasive account of self-cultivation (though I would agree that such a theory is absent) but in Mozi's positing of an objective criterion of rightness that can be accessed through a process of reasoning. Mozi, in other words, provides reasons to care, based on the ability of human beings to attain a higher vantage point from which to consider what is right. How he goes about making his argument is of crucial importance. Seeing these reasons to care involves stepping out of the limited, partial perspective of ordinary experience and envisioning the world from a different vantage point—one that is more comprehensive and that affords a view onto the causal relations among things. This is not the same as reason controlling caring, as Nivison proposes: it is about recognizing that our emotions have a conceptual and perceptual context, and that our understanding of how things work, and of what our predicament in the world is like, actually has bearing on how we feel. Mozi notes, for instance, that people's capacity to act humanely depends very much on their material circumstances; thus, while in times of good harvest people are generous (*ren* 仁) and good (*liang* 良), in times of bad harvest, they are miserly (*lin* 吝) and vicious (*e* 惡).²² This makes it all the more important that they be able to see beyond their immediate reality and gain a broader perspective onto how their actions might affect the larger world around them. The general claim is, thus, that if we have a fuller, more comprehensive window onto the world, we will come to form right judgments and pursue the proper course of action. The hope is that having this more comprehensive window will motivate people to care.

This higher vantage point is objective to the extent that it involves basic processes of reasoning and common sense that Mozi assumes are plain and evident to everyone. It is not based on an all-seeing, all-knowing perspective of objectivity that aspires to a "view from nowhere."²³ Nor does it mean that the standpoint of the individual perceiver is no longer relevant; instead, Mozi's paradigm of knowledge still works through the cognitive agency of the knower insofar as it relies on the subjective experience of reasoning for oneself and arriving at right conclusions. Considered in this way, Mozi emerges not as a psychologically naïve Confucian who failed to adequately grasp the basic realities of human motivation, but as a critically minded thinker who offered a genuine alternative to the values and approaches of the Confucians, and who proposed that human beings possess inner resources enabling them to grasp the proper guidelines and norms for structuring their lives.

22. *Mozi yinde* 5/5/15.

23. Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The idea of a two-fold visual perspective has intriguing resonances with the subjective-objective distinction in Nagel's study, but the nature of the self-transcendent perspective that we find in early China is quite different from the nonexistent "objectivity" that Nagel discusses.

ESTABLISHING OBJECTIVE STANDARDS: KNOWLEDGE
BEYOND MODELS

As we have seen, Mozi traces all the major problems of the world back to one basic fact: that people “do not care about each other” (*bu xiang ai* 不相愛). Ministers and sons have no filial affection (*xiao* 孝) toward their sovereigns and fathers, rulers and fathers have no benevolent affection (*ci* 慈) toward their subjects and sons. In these relationships, care for oneself (*zi ai* 自愛) leads sons to benefit themselves at the expense of their fathers, younger brothers to benefit themselves at the expense of their older brothers, and ministers to benefit themselves at the expense of their sovereign. This lack of caring is what has led to the current state of disorder (*luan* 亂) [14.2].²⁴

In view of the deviant potential of human emotional inclinations, it is necessary, Mozi proposes, to deploy standards of right conduct—*fa* 法 or *yi* 儀—by which to make clear the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, and through which we can evaluate existing practices and arrive at proper guidelines for our actions.²⁵ In his arguments against fatalism (*fei ming* 非命), Mozi lays out a methodology for validating any theory or doctrine (*yan* 言)—one based on the application of a set of three criteria for justifying truth claims. All theories, according to Mozi, should be evaluated according the Three Tests, *san fa* 三法 (or alternatively, the Three Gauges, *san biao* 三表), that make up the fixed, unchanging standards (*yi* 儀) by which to test the soundness of any claim. These consist of their Basis (*ben* 本), Source (*yuan* 原), and Efficacy (*yong* 用).

Having a Basis means that a theory must be based on the “deeds of the ancient sage-kings” (*guzhe shengwang zhi shi* 古者聖王之事)—that is, it should have historical precedence in the activities of ancient sage-rulers whose actions we can trust were correct; having a Source means that it has been corroborated by the “evidence” (*shi* 實) of the “eyes and ears (literally, ears and eyes, *er mu* 耳目) of the people”; and having Efficacy means that, having implemented it as policy, one can “observe (*guan* 觀) how it has benefited (*li* 利) the state and the people.”²⁶ By way of these Three Tests, Mozi subjects all doctrines and theories to the three criteria of (1) historical precedence, (2) empirical verification, and (3) tangible benefit. To attempt to propose a theory (*yan* 言) without such standards, Mozi stresses, would be like “trying to figure out when the sun rises and sets on a moving potter’s wheel; you would not be able to clearly know (*ming zhi* 明知) what is

24. *Mozi yinde* 21/14/4–8.

25. See Hui-chieh Loy, “Justification and Debate: Thoughts on Mohist Moral Epistemology,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2008): 455–471.

26. A similar passage can be found in the chapter “Against Fatalism” (*Fei ming* 非命, Part 3), with some minor changes; for instance, the Three Criteria are listed as *san fa* 三法, and the first of the Three Criteria is *kao* 考 (Investigation), rather than *ben* 本 (Basis). *Mozi yinde* 60/37/2–3. Repeated in “Against Fatalism,” Part 2. *Mozi yinde* 58/36/3–5.

the difference between right and wrong, benefit and harm.”²⁷ Through the use of such “tests” and “gauges,” Mozi asserts the necessity of having fixed criteria with which to justify one’s theories.

Elsewhere, in a chapter titled “Standards and Models” (*fayi* 法儀), Mozi appeals to another category of tools—the wheelwright’s compass and the carpenter’s square—to convey the importance of having unchanging standards of measurement (*fa* 法) so as to achieve the right results:

In performing any task, one must deploy standards and models. It has never been the case that someone has successfully achieved something without standards and models. Even the most accomplished officials deploy standards when they serve as generals and councilors; even the most accomplished craftsmen deploy standards when they perform their tasks. Craftsmen use the carpenter’s square when making square objects, compasses in making circles, levels and chords for ensuring straightness, and plumb lines for determining the perpendicular. All craftsmen, be they skilled or unskilled, use these five tools as their standards.²⁸

Mozi’s invoking of craftsmen’s tools here suggests that arriving at the proper understanding of things is a matter of applying a single, absolute measure by which to determine truth and falsity, right and wrong. Just as one uses the instruments of craft to properly fashion objects, one could apply models and standards to one’s views about how to do things to ensure that they are correct and proper.

In view of such craft-based images, Mozi’s epistemology is often described as a matter of determining conformity to some external rule or measure. In his explanation of the Mohist conception of *fa*, Chris Fraser invokes a distinction between grasping a “definition or principle” and “the practical ability to perform a task successfully.” Fraser concludes that *fa* represents “paradigms or prototypes” with which we compare and distinguish something that we seek to understand, and that it is this activity of comparing and distinguishing that constitutes knowledge itself: “Drawing distinctions in this way is the functional equivalent, in Mohist thought, of making a judgment or forming a belief. The ability to draw the distinctions correctly is knowledge.”²⁹

As presented here, knowledge in the Mohist conception is matter of applying a single measure and, to this extent, it is a kind of technical and practical skill, “the execution of which can be aided by reference to models or exemplars—that is, *fa*.” Hui-chieh Loy has similarly observed in his study of the Mohist criteria for *yan* 言, or doctrines, that *yan* are ultimately a kind of “verbal package” that amounts to a “maxim of conduct” rather than “a claim to truth.”³⁰ The upshot of such

27. Mozi yinde 56/35/7.

28. Mozi yinde 3/4/1–3.

29. Fraser, “Mohism.” Chris Fraser’s entry on “Mohism” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

30. Loy, “Justification and Debate,” 457.

approaches is that when Mohists call for objective standards by which to evaluate and guide the way rulers behave and make policy decisions, they ought to be understood as forwarding prescriptions about how to act, rather than propositions about “how things are.”

These readings would suggest, first, that in the Mohist account, there is no room for true cognitive or rational agency—that knowledge is really about applying standards that are, effectively, external to oneself; and second, that there is a fundamental distinction between practical knowledge (i.e., how to act) and knowledge of what we might call “truth” in the sense of how things are, as such. Both these assumptions do not seem entirely plausible, and they appear, moreover, to be based on some rather longstanding generalizations about Chinese (and even more broadly, non-Western) thought that are ripe for reconsideration. It is telling that both Fraser and Loy cite as justification for their readings an observation made decades ago by A. C. Graham. Graham stated that there was a distinction to be made between Dao and Truth, and that it was a concern with the former that defined the means and ends of philosophical investigation in early China. Presumably, then, Chinese philosophers were not concerned with Truth as such, but with the question of how to live, and this is a truism that would extend to Mozi, as well as to the mainstream thinkers. When Loy makes his claim that the Mohist approach to make truth claims is “closer to a maxim of conduct than a generic claim to truth,” he invokes as his support a certain presumed fact about Chinese thought:

After all, it is a fixed point of conventional wisdom regarding the early Chinese philosophers that, as Angus C. Graham puts it, “the crucial question for all of them is not the Western philosopher’s ‘What is truth?’ but ‘Where is the Way?’, the way to order the state and conduct personal life.”³¹

The language used here is telling: interestingly, it is Graham’s own *yan* that is cited as the *fa* or *biao* for understanding and evaluating Mozi’s approach to knowledge. On the basis of this rather sharp division separating the pursuit of “truth” from the business of practical ethics, which is to live properly, some scholars, like Chad Hansen, have gone so far as to declare that “Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth.”³²

Such a dichotomy strikes me as overblown, and it opens up a vast gulf between theoretical and practical knowledge, which ultimately denies to “Chinese” forms of thinking certain processes, perspectives, and awarenesses that may well be intrinsic to human cognition itself, and to the various possible forms that knowing can take.³³ It is without question that early Chinese philosophers

31. Ibid., 458; Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 3.

32. Hansen, “Chinese Language,” 492.

33. Erica Brindley offers a quite different reading, and argues that Mozi’s invoking of objective criteria demonstrates and “urges one to use rational processes to determine what is right and wrong in the world,” and that this

in general, and Mozi in particular, directed their concerns towards ethics and politics. However, to go on to deny a genuine concern with knowing as such is unwarranted: the idea that knowledge should be grounded on “how things are,” on the one hand, and a “purely abstract” philosophical concern with Truth as such, on the other, are really two different things. Nor can we conveniently excise theoretical from practical forms of knowledge. One might seek to understand the properties of phenomenal reality, make justified conclusions based on verifiable premises, and deploy logical reasoning without making assumptions about whether one’s claims refer back to some “metaphysical truth.”

My conclusion about Mozi’s epistemology, based on his emphasis on fixed and objective standards of knowledge and judgment, is that knowledge involves much more than applying and conforming to standards that exist outside of oneself. Instead, it is about *arriving at* conclusions that Mozi considers to be obvious once a person is in the right frame of mind and can see things as they truly are. The act of knowing, then, is about undergoing the cognitive processes and forms of reasoning that allow one to reach the right understanding of things. The kind of reasoning deployed in the Three Tests—seeing causal relationships, drawing conclusions from premises, and relying on empirical testimony—all depend on the individual’s capacity to come up with conclusions for oneself, through the deployment of one’s cognitive and evaluative faculties. All are geared toward the understanding of “how things are,” and all presuppose an ability to recognize the reasons why something that is deemed right is indeed right. Ultimately, if Mozi advocates deploying “objective” standards of rightness through which to reform the world, this is not to be understood in the sense that their authority lies outside the individual knower. The reasoning through which they proceed is accessible to all people and is derived from a certain shared fixture with which human knowing operates. However, they can only be activated if people can overcome the short-sightedness of their ordinary, self-interested perspective. It is the role of conceptual models such as analogies to bring such activation about.

COGNITIVE AGENCY AND THE USES OF ANALOGY

A central argument of this chapter has been that Mozi attributes far greater rational agency to human beings than has generally been acknowledged, and

is an indication of the “early Mohist belief in human agency.” It is not clear, however, whether the cognitive agency is something that all people can share: Brindley assumes that this capacity is something that Mozi himself claims and that it is deployed by Mozi to create a “blueprint” by which to shape the people’s conduct so that “others who do not possess his insights into morality can still reap benefits from them” (p. 416). Brindley, then, acknowledges the possibility of cognitive agency, but claims that it is only the case in certain extraordinary individuals. My sense is that, while Mozi would not necessarily claim that all people possess the same level of reasoning ability, some of the reasoning processes that Mozi describes may not be the prerogative of a rare few, but a feature of a basic common sense that is generally shared. Erica Brindley, “Human Agency and the Ideal of Shang Tong (Upward Conformity) in Early Mohist Writings,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2007): 409–425.

that this agency amounts to a capacity to reach proper conclusions about the right course of action. This involves the use of cognitive capacities that are presumably universal, but that are not necessarily being deployed as they should be because of people's inclination toward partiality, which prevents them from considering the well-being of society as a whole. Mozi describes this lack of concern for the general welfare as a matter of "not knowing (*bu zhi* 不知)." This terminology is significant: for Mozi, the problem is ultimately about the failure to deploy one's reasoning capacities in the right way, and to recognize that certain forms of reasoning, whose validity is clear and evident in some situations, are just as applicable in others. The tool for drawing out these connections is analogy. Mozi's analogies are primarily technical, involving skill-based practices and crafts with simple, straightforward criteria of excellence and achievement. But these analogies represent more than models to conform to; they are meant to activate cognitive processes that should be applied in other situations, including that of solving the problems of strife and disorder in the world. They involve, in other words, the active engagement of the subjective knower.

In the medical analogy that appears in the first chapter on "Impartial Caring," Mozi proposes that the first step to solving the problem of disorder (*luan* 亂) that has plagued the world is to properly understand its cause—that is, knowing "whence it has arisen (*suo zi qi* 所自起)." Just as a physician cannot find a cure for an ailment without determining its cause, so it is that a sage who seeks to bring order to the world must investigate (*cha* 察) the sources of political disorder.³⁴ The point of this analogy is to compare a situation in which people seem at a loss as to what they should do—and, indeed, are consistently doing the wrong thing—with one in which the solution is clear and obvious. The analogy, then, guides the individual through the process of reasoning that is operative in the first situation to show that it should be applied in the second. By means of the analogy, Mozi demonstrates a methodology for arriving at the true cause of the problem of strife and disorder in the world—namely, people's failure to care about each other (*bu xiang ai* 不相愛) and their underlying tendency toward partiality, or *bie* 別. The analogy also makes clear the solution, which is to care about others and practice impartiality.

Another element in Mozi's methodology is knowing to draw the right conclusion from the premises. In a chapter called "Esteem the Worthy" (*shang xian zhong* 尚賢中), Mozi stresses that rulers ought to hire officials on the basis of their ability, rather than on account of their personal relationship to them. To make this point, he compares the task of employing competent officials with that of hiring a skilled tailor to sew a garment and a skilled butcher to slaughter

34. *Mozi yinde* 21/14/1–4.

an animal. In these situations, the most reasonable way to proceed would be to employ people who possess the skill and ability to perform the tasks at hand:

When rulers are in need of a garment that they are not able to make, they invariably rely on a good tailor; when they have an ox or sheep that they are not able to slaughter, they invariably rely on a good butcher. In these two types of cases, rulers always know (*zhi* 知) that they must esteem the worthy and employ the capable in order to get things done. And yet, when it comes to the disorder of the country and dangers to the state, they do not know (*bu zhi* 不知) that they should employ the capable in order to govern, but instead employ their relatives, the rich and noble without merit, and people with attractive appearance. Now, as for employing the rich and noble without merit, or those with attractive appearance, how could it be that such people would be wise and intelligent? If you employ such people to govern the country, then this would be to employ the unwise and unintelligent to rule the country, and you can expect (*zhi* 知) that the country will fall into disorder. Now, when rulers employ a person's mind because they are attracted to his appearance (*ai qi se* 愛其色), they are conferring favor (*yu qi ai* 與其愛) without examining their knowledge (*bu cha qi zhi* 不察其知). Thus it is that those who cannot govern a hundred are appointed to offices having jurisdiction over a thousand, and those who cannot govern a thousand are appointed to offices having jurisdiction over ten thousand.³⁵

Through this analogy between hiring officials, on the one hand, and hiring butchers and tailors, on the other, Mozi seeks to establish that there are certain shared, commonsensical standards of excellence and achievement in the art governing, just as there are in the crafts. But he also makes an observation about a flaw in our cognitive tendencies—namely, that although in the case of hiring butchers and tailors, people know (*zhi* 知) that they should “esteem the worthy and employ the capable (尚賢使能),” when it comes to employing officials, people do not know (*bu zhi* 不知) that they should “employ the capable for governing.”

The problem, from Mozi's point of view, is thus not simply that rulers do not do what is right, but also that they do not *know* to do what is right. What is critical, then, is to effect a transformation in how rulers understand what they are doing, and not simply to try and change their behavior or their feelings. This Mozi seeks to do by demonstrating, through the use of analogy, that the two hiring situations are effectively the same, *and* that they can proceed by way of the same reasoning process to arrive at right solutions to the problems of government. Mozi's heavy use of analogies, then, does not necessarily imply that he considers knowledge

35. *Mozi yinde* 10/9/32–38.

to be simply a matter of identifying similarities and differences between things. Instead, the analogies call for the enactment of forms of reasoning by which to draw proper conclusions. It is this activity of reasoning, and not the form of the analogy, that is the object of knowing.

The claim I am making here about the workings of analogy in the *Mozi* is at odds with a certain conventional way of thinking about what an analogy is and what it does—namely, that it is a picture or representation of something whose heuristic value is based on a formal resemblance to something else. I have departed from this approach in emphasizing the way in which analogy can work as an agent of experience. In this respect, Barbara Maria Stafford's conception of analogy is particularly resonant. Stafford describes analogy as a "fundamentally participatory mode of perception," thus emphasizing the kind of active engagement that an analogy can draw out from one who contemplates it.³⁶ The idea that, through the use of analogy, one "participates" in a mode of perception is one that is arguably embraced by Mozi as well. Mozi seems to deploy analogy in such a way that he "walks" one through, as it were, a process of correct and justifiable reasoning—one that can be applied to other situations.

The upshot of all this is that "objectivity" in the Mohist sense does not imply a transcendence of the particularity of one's individual vantage point, and the realization of an absolute, depersonalized grasp of reality. It is about tapping into commonsensical forms of reasoning that are presumably within the capacity of all human beings, and that lead us to to right conclusions—conclusions whose soundness we can all agree on. Mozi's objectivity, then, is the process by which our perceptual and cognitive faculties come into awareness of how things are and how they work.

REASONS TO CARE AND ENVISIONING THE HUMAN

In the account I have been pursuing here, I have endeavored to present certain important features of Mozi's philosophy in such a way that they might no longer appear so foreign and out of touch with our own standards of reasonableness. This is in response to what I think have been rather extreme readings of Mozi's thought, which focus on its gaps and inadequacies, its psychological implausibility, its crudeness and simplicity, and its denial of cognitive agency. Since a certain amount of charity is in order when dealing with past thinkers—especially those who lived more than two thousand years ago—it may be prudent to respond to presumed gaps, blindnesses, and failures as an opportunity to reflect on how a given thinker's views might hang together, how it could possibly make sense, and if so, under what conditions and upon which premises we might envision it as a

36. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 58.

serious proposal. If we grant this, then rather than fixating on what Mozi failed to do, we might instead focus our efforts on understanding what Mozi might have been trying to do.

Mozi was clearly not attempting to provide an account of self-cultivation in the manner of Confucius and the other thinkers of the mainstream tradition. His attention was directed, rather, toward the larger, macroscopic picture of society and the world. Mozi confronted an inhumane, violent world full of suffering and injustice, and he sought ways to ameliorate this situation. A powerless observer, he proposed that it may be possible to change the behavior of those who caused all the trouble if they could understand that their destructive behavior resulted from a failure to truly see what they were doing. If they could just step away from their ordinary, partial vantage point and take in the big picture, they would recognize the harmful consequences of their actions. By perceiving things properly, they would come to feel differently, and thus come to make the right decisions.

The voluntarist/utilitarian reading of Mozi would have it that Mozi expected—quite unreasonably—that the feelings would conform to the dictates of externally derived norms or “rational” self-interest. But this is a problem that has been manufactured by the presumed gap between emotion and reason, with reason being represented by the external, “rational” criterion of self-interest. If we recognize, as I have proposed, that the knowledge criteria that Mozi invokes are not just norms to conform to but also ways of inciting sound forms of reasoning, then the gap all but disappears. Mozi’s analogies are not so much models for conduct as they are conceptual tools for enacting reasoned processes that lead people to arrive at a true understanding of a situation. Similarly, I suggest here that Mozi’s entreaties to care about all people do not require that one force one’s feelings this way or that, but instead, call for feelings that accompany having a broader, more comprehensive view of things. Just as in English, the terms “partial” and “impartial” possess both perspectival and emotive dimensions, so it is that the Chinese terms *jian* and *bie* have a similar multivalence that can encompass both aspects. By being comprehensive in one’s perspective one achieves a more enlightened and magnanimous concern for others. Having greater knowledge and insight into things ultimately develops and fosters concern.

The ambiguities of the important Mohist term *tong* 同 capture how the idea of commonality can dissolve the potential divisions between the immediacy of personal experience and a recognition of the common good—a division that is often problematically reduced to the tension between cognitive and emotive values. Mozi invokes the term to refer variously to a sense of harmony and oneness between people, as in the case of “united ambition” (*tong xin* 同心);³⁷ to the act of bringing to a unity, as in the goal of “uniting the conceptions of rightness in the

37. *Mozi yinde* 11/9/45.

world” (*yi tong tian xia zhi yi* 一同天下之義);³⁸ and to the endeavor to align oneself with another, as in “identifying with a superior” (*shang tong* 同上). *Tong* also refers to shared experience, which, as we have seen, is an important criterion of knowledge for Mozi: what has been jointly confirmed by the “ears and eyes” (*er mu* 耳目) of the people can be taken as constituting real knowledge. This leads Mozi to conclude, among other things, that ghosts really do exist. While some might object that the claim to have seen and heard ghosts cannot be verified, Mozi argues that the common testimony of what “many have seen together” (*zhong zhi suo tong jian* 眾之所同見) and “many have heard together” (*zhong zhi suo tong wen* 眾之所同聞) can be accepted as proof of their existence.³⁹

Here, too, it is worth suspending our current norms of reasoning to consider not only Mozi’s blindspots but also his endeavor to reconceptualize the foundations of knowing itself, in accordance with the exigencies of an expanded vision of the human community. In proposing *tong* as a basic criterion of truth and right understanding, Mozi puts forward unity, sharability, and commonality of experience as basic criteria for knowledge. Underlying this idea is an assumption that is of crucial importance—namely, that human beings possess shared faculties that allow them to arrive at the right understanding of things. This has direct implications for how to understand Mozi’s injunction to “care impartially.” Mozi asserts that people—rulers and other people in positions of power and wealth—should care about the plight of the suffering masses and the great harms they are causing in the world. And he seems to think that getting these people to see things in the right way might actually affect how they feel. The modes of persuasion he deploys to change people’s attitudes include, as we have seen, appeals to self-interest and the use of analogies to guide their reasoning through the situation at hand. But as I have argued, these analogies involve more than formal resemblances between two discrete situations to show how, rationally, one ought to apply the logic of one situation to the other. It also involves recognizing that our inclinations, capacities, and situations are not unique to us, but are shared—that there is a commonality of experience that all human beings can draw from. And that our actions ultimately have repercussions that extend far beyond the realm of what we can perceive immediately.

The following passage from the “The Seven Kinds of Anxiety” (*Qi huan* 七患) chapter aptly illustrates how this works:

Now, if someone, carrying her child to go and draw water from a well, drops the child into the well, the mother would surely go after her to fetch her out. But bad harvests, famine and starvation are greater disasters than dropping one’s child. How can one not address this?⁴⁰

38. *Mozi yinde* 16/12/5–6 and elsewhere.

39. *Mozi yinde* 49/31/14–15.

40. *Mozi yinde* 5/5/13–16.

This passage zeroes in on the perspectival gap that prevents people from caring about large-scale disasters like famine and starvation. The gap is not just a matter of people failing to feel what they think they ought to feel, as the voluntarist reading posits; it is also, in large part, about a failure of experience. We are not naturally inclined to care about large-scale disasters in the same way that we would care about the harm that befalls us personally—as in the case of dropping one's child into a well. To solve the problem, we need to somehow get people—rules, in particular—to care enough to do something about it. And for this, we need to see the big picture. To envision the repercussions of our actions in the larger world, it is necessary to make a cognitive and imaginative leap beyond our immediate experience—one that allows us to appreciate the fact that what happens on a smaller scale can be multiplied exponentially on a far greater scale, and thus merits our concern.

This imaginative work, then, involves broadening the domain of our concern to encompass the collective well-being of the broader human community, premised on our shared predicament with others. But it also involves engaging our affective responsiveness by enabling us to see that what happens on a smaller scale—on a scale that we can feel directly—is, in terms of human cost, multiplied exponentially in the larger one. In joining the two situations, then, Mozi does not only place the example of the dropped baby into a larger context of human distress. He also makes concrete and personal the more widespread humanitarian disaster of suffering and famine. Connecting mass starvation with the plight of a woman dropping her child, Mozi renders the more distant and abstract situation more immediate and concrete, so as to evoke the same kind of sympathy and concern as one feels when one's own child is in danger.

This is a very familiar strategy in our own world, where international humanitarian relief depends on the financial contributions of those who do not see, or care to see, suffering that does not affect them personally. To enlist the necessary support, humanitarian aid organizations put people face to face with those they will never see by showing photographs and video footage of children suffering in impoverished and war-torn areas of the world—children who could just as well be our own. Like Mozi's passage about the baby dropped in the well, these are cognitive devices insofar as they allow people to see and know beyond the boundaries of their normal range of experience and forge a sense of common humanity with them. But as cognitive devices, Mozi's reasons to care involve more than making a logical connection between two situations of human distress; they also seek to activate feelings of compassion by providing both information and imaginative resources by which to properly understand what is happening in the larger world.⁴¹ As in his skill-based analogies, such comparisons endeavor to

41. What I am proposing here is very much in line with Philip Ivanhoe's interpretation of *Menicus* 1A7, which concerns Mencius's advice to King Xuan of Qi to "extend" (*tui* 推) his compassion for the sacrificial ox to his people.

bring about the kind of caring that Mozi thinks human beings should extend to one another. More than just injunctions to feel, they seek to engage the appropriate feelings by tapping into capacities—both cognitive and emotive—that, for all intents and purposes, are part of a shared human endowment.

CONCLUSION

Mozi's principle of impartial caring, which calls upon people to care about the plight of all people—quite against their spontaneous inclinations—is highly significant from the point of view of the evolution of ethics. It is one response to a historical situation in which the breakdown of traditional communities in the wake of ever-expanding political units has led to the dissolution of the existing moral fabric, which presumably would have restrained people from the kind of aggressive, self-serving behavior that Mozi finds so troubling and destructive. But more positively, we might see it also as a symptom of the formation of new, ever-larger political units. Mozi's lament that people failed to give due consideration to those outside their in-group suggests a situation in which diverse people, who had previously not had much to do with each other, were coming together and engaging in open conflict and competition with one another. The sense of moral crisis emerged, arguably, from this convergence of the breakdown of the traditional community, with its culture of affective ties and norms of conduct, and the expanded boundaries of the political community.

Mozi's argument that we must not follow our immediate inclination to pursue personal satisfaction, but should overcome such inclinations by thinking about the benefit of all people, marks that gap in which traditional affective and behavioral norms failed to maintain the balance of interests in the entire community. In forwarding such a solution, Mozi was proposing also that we envision ourselves as members of a broader collectivity of human beings, who are linked in a web of interdependence that implicates not only our shared plight and destiny but also our perceptual faculties. It is upon this common ground that a peaceful and prosperous society could be built.

The vitally important idea of *tong* ultimately reveals how, for Mozi, the human collectivity was based upon the recognition of shared human capacities and a commonality of experience. Whereas Confucius had envisioned the ideal society as the result of a complex balance of individuals interacting with one another in a differentiated social landscape—and had, accordingly, focused on cultivating the intuitions and emotional dispositions that could sustain proper relationships

This way of understanding the workings of analogy in the Mencius is, in my view, applicable to Mozi. See Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Confucian Self Cultivation and Mengzi's Notion of Extension," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, ed. Xiusheng Liu and P. J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 221–241. See the discussion of this passage in chapter 5 of this volume.

with one another—Mozi saw it, rather, as arising from the exercise of a shared cognitive capacity to reason and draw proper conclusions, which enabled them to identify with one another and to act toward the well-being of all. Ultimately, such capacities were not distinct from the intuitive realm of feelings, which they controlled or pushed in the right direction: properly deployed, the feelings and intuitions extended the realm of its concern beyond the boundaries of one's self to all human beings. All that was needed were the right tools to activate them.

Cosmic Desire and Human Agency in the *Daodejing*

The *Daodejing* 道德經 (fourth century BCE?) is a text of uncertain authorship, ascribed by early tradition to a mythical figure called Laozi 老子 (“Old Master”). It contains the earliest known layers of what we now call “Daoist” thinking and is thus often regarded as the source text of the Daoist philosophical tradition, and of the religious Daoist practices that would develop in later centuries.¹ Deploying sparse, poetic language that is at once direct and cryptic, it describes the ultimate human goal as embodying and actualizing the Dao 道, which refers, in this text, to the constant process of creation and transformation by which all things in the universe come to exist, flourish, and develop. This Dao is thus a cosmic force, but also a normative pattern for humans to follow.² Despite its mystical language and eventual appeal to the founders of religious movements and esoteric self-cultivation practices, the *Daodejing* is a text that addresses the practical problems of the day and offers guidance to rulers on how to live properly, achieve power, and order the world.³ The title of the *Daodejing* might then be

1. This text is also often simply called the *Laozi*. As with other writings from this era, the extant versions of this text were certainly the products of a long process of accumulation. Moreover, they bear the traces of interpretation by later editors, most notably, Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE). The scholarly consensus today is that the received text achieved its present form around the mid-third century BCE. On the textual history of the *Daodejing* and its commentarial tradition, see Alan Chan, “The *Daodejing* and Its Tradition,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1–29. While acknowledging the multiple layers of authorship involved in the composition of this text, I assume that there are certain general ideas and assumptions that lend coherence to it, and that point to a consistent (but not necessarily monolithic) ethical vision. There are multiple versions of the text: the received version, which I base my discussion on, and the Mawangdui version, known commonly as the *Dedaoting* 德道經, which reverses the order of the two main sections of this text, the “De” and the “Dao.”

2. The term “Dao” was also invoked by the Confucians and the Mohists, who meant by it a proper path that should guide one’s life and conduct, as well as the teaching that illuminates such a path. Brook Ziporyn has attempted to capture this double meaning by invoking the term “discourse,” which fortuitously also contains the idea of a “course” to follow, as well as of the spoken aspect of a “guiding (dis)course.” See “Introduction,” in *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), xiii.

3. Isabelle Robinet has argued for the “unity and continuity” of Daoism, despite the diverse forms that Daoist belief and religious practices have taken over the centuries. The core of this tradition is a set of common features that she identifies in all the various Daoist traditions—among them a shared “cosmology and anthropology,” a predominance of “circularity and cycles” as the defining structuring metaphor, a belief in a single Dao that has spawned all things, and a certain “rational” and logically structured view of reality. My approach to this text accords with such emphases. See Isabelle Robinet and Phyllis Brooks, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

properly translated as the “Classic of the Way and its Virtue,” with *de* 德 referring to a kind of efficacious power, potency, or “virtuosity” defined by a standard of fulfillment and optimal realization.

One of the salient features of this text is its negative account of emotions and desires as fundamentally contrary to the realization of the perfected life—a life in accordance with the natural process of the cosmos. For those who wish to tread this path, the text advocates pacifying sensual desires and doing away with displays of emotions that assert strength and willfulness [ch. 68].⁴ Although specific emotions, such as anger (*nu* 怒) and courage (*yong* 勇), are occasionally mentioned with disapproval, the focus of concern is the problem of *yu* 欲—a term often translated simply as “desire” but here referring specifically to certain sense-based desires that are distinctive to human beings. *Yu* as sensual desire is usually described as a hindrance to living in accordance with the Dao, which is itself said to be “constantly without sensual desire” (*chang wu yu* 常無欲) [ch. 34].⁵ The aspiring sage, seeking to emulate the Dao, must thus “diminish his sense of self and reduce his desires” (*shaosi gua yu* 少私寡欲) [ch. 19].⁶ Such teachings have led to the widespread view that the *Daodejing* is a fundamentally ascetic text that regards desire as a destructive force that ought to be eradicated.

A negative discourse of desire is a prominent and undeniable feature of the text, and its presence is consistent with what we know about the historical predicament that intellectuals faced during the Warring States period. Advocating a suppression of one’s desires would be a normal psychological response to a world filled with chaos and violence—especially as part of a critique of those men in power who were wreaking havoc and taking possession of the “sacred vessel” (*shen qi* 神器) of the world to satisfy their boundless desires [ch. 29].⁷ It would also make sense as part of a strategy for alleviating the widespread suffering in the world. Warning people about the perils of desire might help the powerless to cope with their difficulties, very much as Buddhist asceticism sought to do in similarly desperate times.

But there are some basic problems with the ascetic reading of the *Daodejing*, as it is usually pursued. First, there are methodological issues: a sampling of passages about a fairly delimited concept—in this case, that of *yu* 欲, or sensual desire—cannot be taken as representative of the meaning of desire in the text as a whole. Gaining a larger perspective on the workings of desire in the text requires a consideration of a broader range of relevant ideas, as well as a

4. The source references correspond to the version given in *Laozi Dadodejing* 老子道德經, Sibu Congkan edition (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1929), hereafter cited as *DDJ*. This passage appears in *DDJ* 68/16a/2–6.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, translated passages from the *Daodejing* are quoted, with occasional modifications, from *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1963).

6. *DDJ* 19/9b/5–6.

7. *DDJ* 29/15a/2–8.

more general understanding of the conceptual and ethical contexts in which such ideas emerge. When we do so, it becomes clear that the collection of negative statements about desire do not amount to a proper picture of what desire, at a more general level, means in the text. If the text rejects certain harmful forms of desiring, it is far from forwarding an ideal of desirelessness. The *Daodejing*'s negative account of sensual desires must be considered as part of a far more complex picture that recognizes multiple valences of desire, and that acknowledges the crucial role of emotions and desires in the proper mastery of life.

I shall argue here that, in the manner of the other mainstream texts examined in this book, the *Daodejing* recognizes emotions and desires as natural and constant features of human life that must be realized in some optimal form. These more natural forms of desire include the biologically driven desire for food, drink, shelter, and sex. It also recognizes the aspiration of rulers to satisfy their political ambition to achieve domestic stability and a viable, enduring political order. Both of these desires are accepted as natural and requiring satisfaction. But there is an even higher order at work, which is the level at which desire, properly realized, embodies the workings of the normative order. This optimal form of desire is the human counterpart to the Dao itself. This desire is the source from which all things in the world arise and move toward fulfillment. As the very mechanism through which the cosmos brings things into being and moves them along toward their fulfillment, desire is the model for those aspiring to sagehood. It is this level of desire that one who pursues the Dao should emulate, both through one's actions and through one's knowing.

Desire, then, is what incites, animates, and furnishes the content of knowing because it represents the workings of the Dao within humans: it is the productive force by which all things come into being in the world and move toward fulfillment. Through the activation of desire one comes to achieve knowledge of how things are, which is necessary both for personal satisfaction and for understanding the art of rulership. Only those of the highest discernment, who transcend the push and pull of emotional disturbances arising from sensory contact with the world, can access and harness the natural patterns of the world to achieve their own ends. It is this desiring awareness that is the basis for the extraordinary agency of the sage—of her capacity to apprehend the workings of the world and put this knowledge into action.

THE PARADOX OF DESIRE AND DESIRELESSNESS?

The ethical role of desire in the *Daodejing* has been a source of scholarly contention for centuries. The extent of the disagreement can be seen in the vastly diverging proposals for translating the famous opening chapter of the text, which contains the seemingly paradoxical injunction to be both “constantly without

desire” (*chang wu yu* 常無欲) and yet “constantly possess desire” (*chang you yu* 常有欲). The passage, in D. C. Lau’s translation, appears as follows:

The Dao⁸ that can be spoken of
Is not the constant Dao;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
Hence always be without desire (*chang wu yu* 常無欲) in order to observe
its secrets (*miao* 妙);
But always allow yourself to have desires (*chang you yu* 常有欲) so as to
observe its manifestation (*jiao* 徼).
These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery -
The gateway of the manifold secrets. [ch. 1]⁹

The difficulty with this passage is that the term used for desire, *yu* 欲—which in all other instances in the *Daodejing* possesses the negative connotation of sensual indulgence—appears to have an ambivalent meaning. To further complicate matters, the passage links desire to the most profound and central questions of the text—namely, the nature of the Dao itself, the problems of conveying (*dao* 道) it, the possibility of perceiving it, and the inherent limitations of language (or the act of naming, *ming* 名). Depending on how one translates the couplet about desire and desirelessness, and the layers of Dao that they give access to (*miao* 妙 and *jiao* 徼), the state of “having desire” can be understood either as essential to the act of truly observing the Dao or as contradictory to it, leading to a limited or distorted perception.

Comparing some of the more scholarly translations of the text among the hundreds that have appeared in Western languages, we find the jury fully divided into three basic interpretive camps. The first rejects desire as contrary to perceiving the Dao. In this reading, to possess desire amounts to approaching the Dao through a perceptual veil that allows one to see *merely* its *jiao*—its “outer fringe,” its “mere shell,” or its “outcomes.”¹⁰ This approach is more typical of older translations, and is usually based on a dualism of corrupt matter/transcendent truth,

8. The “Way” of Lau’s translation has been modified to “Dao.”

9. *DDJ* 1/1a/4–10.

10. “Outer fringe”: *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891); “mere shell”: *The Canon of Reason and Virtue: (Lao-tze’s Tao Teh King) Chinese and English*, trans. D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974); “outcomes”: Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974).

apparently inspired either by the Platonic/Christian tradition or by Buddhism. But the “negative” understanding of desire as obstructing true perception persists in more recent translations and studies as well. Wong Kwok Kui, for instance, has argued that the *Laozi*’s perspective of knowledge distinguishes between knowledge of the *miao* 妙 (which he takes as “deep mystery”) and its *jiao* 徼 (explained as “limit,” “outer manifestation”), and thus considers the former to be privileged over the other, representing a “metaphysical truth” that furnishes the counterpart to Hegel’s Absolute. Such an explanation supports his understanding of desire in the *Laozi* as something unambiguously bad, undermining both political order and proper knowledge of the Dao.¹¹

A second approach understands the possession of desire as part of a twofold path of knowing, in which the conditions of both having and not having desire are necessary for perceiving different dimensions of the Dao—its *jiao* (“manifestation”) as well as its *miao* (“mystery”). The 1884 translation of Frederick Balfour underscores the necessity of both these aspects:

It is therefore in habitual passionlessness [the Quiescent phase of DAO]
that its mystery may be scanned;

And in habitual desire [the Active phase of DAO] that its develop-
ments may be perceived.¹²

Even more interesting, however, are those translations that avoid the issue of desire altogether. Some early scholars like John Chalmers (1868) and Richard Wilhelm (1910) skip over the entire couplet in their translations.¹³ Others, like Wing-tsit Chan, deploy a different syntax entirely so that the subject of these lines becomes *wu* 無 and *you* 有 (which Chan takes as “non-being” and “being”), thereby avoiding the messy issue of desire altogether:

Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety,
And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.¹⁴

11. Wong Kwok Kui, “Hegel’s Criticism of *Laozi* and its Implications,” *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 1 (January 2011): 56–79. See also *Lao-tzu: Te-tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*, trans. Robert Henricks (New York: Ballantine, 1989); and *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

12. The “Tao” of the original version has been rendered into the pinyin Romanization form of Dao. See Frederic Henry Balfour, ed. and trans., *Taoist Texts: Ethical, Political, and Speculative* (London: Trubner, 1884). Other influential translations that recognize the importance of possessing desire include *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau; *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-Te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, trans. Richard John Lynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002); and *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

13. Laozi, *The Speculation on Metaphysics, Polity and Morality of “The Old Philosopher,”* trans. John Chalmers (London: Trubner, 1868). Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Book of Meaning and Life*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, trans. into English by H. G. Ostwald (London: Penguin, 1990; rpt. London and New York: Arkana, 1985).

14. Laozi, *The Way of Lao Tzu*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: MacMillan, 1963).

This diversity of interpretations over a century and a half of translating the *Daodejing* makes plain that the issue of desire has been a major and enduring point of contention. Resolving the controversy requires coming up with a plausible reading of how desire figures into the *Daodejing* as a whole. For reasons that will become clearer over the course of this chapter, the negative account of desire as something that only gives access to “outer manifestations”—as opposed to something “absolute” and “metaphysical,” to invoke the terms of Wong Kwok Kui¹⁵—is contrary to the ontology of the *Daodejing* as a whole and must be rejected as implausible. Suffice it to say for the moment that there are no indications in the *Laozi* of a reality “beyond forms” that seeks to transcend the material reality itself. The *Laozi*’s warnings against certain kinds of sensual desires, as well as its attention to the inadequacy of language to capture the fullness of the Dao, do not automatically translate into a gaze toward the realm “beyond” existing reality. As I will argue here, the *Laozi* envisions a variety of channels through which to access the true nature of the world, and these channels involve the engagement of emotions and desires that are still very much part of the practical enterprise of living in the world.

How shall we, then, understand the injunction to “constantly possess desires,” especially in consideration of the unmistakably negative connotation of *yu* in other passages of this text?

A. C. Graham explains the paradox as a deliberate form of self-contradiction meant to convey the sheer fact of the limits of language. He takes the central question of the passage as: “How does the Way being with or without a name connect with the sage being or without desires?” And he reads the text as proceeding to answer this question by suggesting that the distinction between desire and desirelessness is itself meaningless:

The *Laozi*’s method is simply to smash the dichotomy of desire and desirelessness by contradictory commands both constantly to be without desire and constantly to desire. . . . Having tried out both sides of the dichotomy the text now throws it aside; to name as “nameless” is itself to divide named and nameless in what is ultimately the same.¹⁶

In other words, Graham proposes reading the statement as though it were a Zen *kōan*, designed to jolt consciousness into a higher realm of awareness.

One basic question that emerges from Graham’s reading is: Why does the text speak of desire at all? If our ability to access the ineffable Dao rests upon our relationship to desire, as the text seems to be suggesting, what is it about desire that opens up this realm that language cannot properly speak of? Graham does not comment on this issue, and in the end, Graham’s interest in this passage is not to

15. Wong, “Hegel’s Criticism of *Laozi*,” 70–73.

16. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 220.

unravel the meaning of desire in the text, but to understand what this passage on desire has to tell us about the *Laozi's* approach to the problem of naming—that is, the status of propositional language. However, it seems quite clear that desire itself is an issue of central importance in the text, and that we need to consider it as more than an instance of the problematic act of naming. It is certainly connected to the problem of naming insofar as it, like the Dao, is a complex and multivalent entity whose relationship with its name is difficult to grasp. But as a counterpart to the Dao, it is also a cosmic force whose functioning helps us to understand what human beings should aspire to. To this extent, it deserves investigation in its own right.

Recent scholars have continued along the lines of Graham in their reading of the passage as a vehicle through which alternative forms of understanding are unleashed through the apparent paradox of the passage. P. J. Ivanhoe proposes that the paradox simply “dissolves” if we approach the passage in “more therapeutic and psychological terms.” That is, by recognizing within ourselves the “prereflective intuitions and tendencies that incline us to spontaneously grasp and accord with the Dao,” we can rise above the more problematic and excessive desires that divide us from the Dao.¹⁷ Ivanhoe has proposed about the *Daodejing* more generally that it is “more a form of philosophical therapy than the presentation of a theory. We are to be challenged by its paradoxes and moved by its images and poetic cadence more than by any arguments it presents.”¹⁸ Ivanhoe suggests, then, that by suspending our usual rational forms of thinking, which would see a paradox in the text, and using more intuitive channels of understanding, we can somehow transcend the troublesome desires that keep us from apprehending and uniting with the Dao. These intuitive modes of understanding are presumably unleashed by the dialectic of desire and desirelessness, but how this all works is not explained at much length.

The extended philosophical commentary of Ames and Hall goes further to affirm the positive role of emotions and desires implied in this passage. Ames and Hall contend that *wu yu* cannot be taken as simply “being without desire” but must be qualified to refer to being “objectless in one’s desires”:

Beyond the cognitive understanding of experience, there is the epistemology of caring. We know things most immediately and profoundly through empathetic feeling. This affective form of knowing is the content of our meaningful relationships, and the concreteness of these relations defines what we really are. As such, our desires are specific. But just as the processive character of experience ultimately defeats all rational structures, process also renders all concrete knowledge of specific things contingent.

17. Laozi, *Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. Ivanhoe, xxvii.

18. Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 161.

We can only know specifically, yet process requires that we constantly surrender the specificity of what we know. Optimally, then, we must have desires while at the same time be resolutely objectless in these desires.¹⁹

The interest of this interpretation lies in its observation that emotions and desires possess epistemological significance. This is an important move in the right direction, as far as I'm concerned. However, I do not agree with the premises of this reading. Most basically, I do not accept that desire contributes to sagely knowing by providing access to an "affective form of knowing" that is somehow fundamentally different from "rational" forms of knowing. This presupposes a strict reason-emotion dichotomy that is not tenable. As I have argued in my introduction, the distinction is conceptually suspect because it does not properly take into account the way that experiences and processes we conventionally identify as "emotive" and "rational" are integrated in real situations. Moreover, the application of this dichotomy in the endeavor to identify an alternative "Chinese" form of logic seems to partake of a long-standing Western fantasy of Chinese "holism" that denies the value placed on cognitive agency in the Chinese intellectual tradition.²⁰

Current research supports the idea that our affective responses to things work in tandem with what we would recognize as more "reasoned" processes, and that therefore these do not represent fundamentally alternative channels of knowing.²¹ The claim of Ames and Hall that "beyond the cognitive understanding of experience, there is the epistemology of caring" does not acknowledge that our caring, and our affective responses to things in general, are cognitively based insofar as they are part of a more generally coherent structure by which we make sense of the world. I believe that the *Daodejing* recognizes such a structure, and that this structure is not rooted in an alternative epistemology that "ultimately defeats all rational structures" or even lies "beyond the cognitive understanding of experience." A further, more specific point that Ames and Hall make about the meaning of desire in their opening chapter involves the problem of "objects." They propose reconciling the possible contradiction of having and not having desires by way of a distinction between what they refer to as "process" and "specificity." The "process" mode of responding to the world "renders all concrete knowledge of specific things contingent." Desire as a process, then, is acceptable insofar as one is "resolutely objectless in these desires."²² By this they assume that the proper forms of desire retain a noninstrumental openness to the world of things as they are.²³

19. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, trans. Ames and Hall, 79.

20. See Slingerland, "Body and Mind," for a survey of this "holist" reading of China and a discussion of its problems.

21. E.g., Pessoa, *Cognitive Emotional Brain*.

22. Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, trans. Ames and Hall, 77-79.

23. *Ibid.*, 11.

While I admit that is a convenient solution to the puzzle, I do not think the issue boils down to whether or not we are dealing with “things” in their specificity and whether one is instrumentalizing them. A focus on such matters may well reflect how the spirit-matter dualism continues to creep back into the picture despite all good intentions. As will be clear from my discussion in the next section, neither *thingness*, as concerns arising from one’s engagement with the particulars of a contingent material world, nor *instrumentalizing* things, is really the problem. I think the two can be reconciled with more optimal forms of desire insofar as the text acknowledges the legitimacy of aspiring to physical and material satisfaction. However one wishes to resolve the potential tensions between the “mystical” and “realpolitik” dimensions of the *Laozi*—an issue that cannot be resolved conclusively, given the gaps in our knowledge of its textual history—what we have in any case is a package in which, in the figure of the sage, political survival, personal well-being, and higher forms of knowing are all present, and inseparable from one another.

Reading the couplet on desire and desirelessness in the context of the passage as a whole, and in light of the particular flow of ideas contained in the text more generally, we might understand the opening passage in the following manner: There is something that is the beginning of the world and that accounts for the production of all things in the cosmos. This something is beyond the capacity of language to capture. But if we indicate it by name, we might refer to it as the “mother of the myriad things.” If we refer to it as that which has no name, it is the beginning of heaven and earth. Nonetheless, we can observe the workings of this something through our experience of desire. By being always without desire, we can observe its subtle workings; by being always in a state of desire, we can observe its manifestations—or more precisely, “where it tends,” following Graham.²⁴ Although these two conditions are different in name, representing distinct propositions, they share the same source. This is the Dao itself.

This would explain what desire has to do with the Dao. In the face of the limitations of language, desire is what gives access to the Dao. Desire is what ultimately drives all living creatures toward their destiny and thereby opens up awareness of Dao—the natural tendencies of things, or how things “move ahead.” But “desire” is the name for something whose constant reality is to be moving and shifting, and thus, to be many things. To say that we should always “have desire” but also always “be without desire” is to acknowledge both the dynamic character of desire and its multivalence. Here, too, we can see the basic resonance between the *Daodejing* and other early mainstream texts. There are problematic forms of

24. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 219. Graham explains in a footnote that *jiao* 徼 is to be taken as a verb meaning “take the direction (not necessarily intentionally) in which something is going to happen.” This would accord with my reading of desire in this passage, and in the text more generally, as an underlying potentiality or movement that characterizes the Dao itself, and thus also as a defining characteristic of optimal intelligence in human beings.

desire—those that threaten our well-being—but there are also desires that are simply natural and constant features of human life, which we cannot suppress or wish away. Then there are those desires that, if properly realized, bring us to an optimal condition of self-realization—a condition that entails higher levels of knowledge and understanding about the nature of reality.

In short, then, I am arguing that the injunction to always have desire and always be without desire is not to pose a paradox—one that leads to a relinquishing of the basic rules of logic and rationality. It is simply to say that there are many forms of desire, and that some are more optimal than others. At the same time, however—and here, too, we are in agreement with other mainstream texts—there is a kind of acceptance of all these levels of desire, even the more “problematic” levels, as defining features of our human experience. Thus, we should not simply aspire to abandon those problematic desires in favor of some distilled, higher experience of self. If it is only by way of rising above our more problematic forms of desiring that we can have access to deep insights about the Dao, it is nevertheless through their functioning that we can fathom the workings of Dao in the real world.

Ultimately, then, the two states of desire and desirelessness coexist in the higher knowing of the sage, and they can even be seen as inseparable in the sense that, from the point of view of a self-conscious observer, one sees the workings of desire in oneself. One is aware of one’s own desiring and nondesiring. The highest awareness of desire—that to which the apprehension of the Dao is linked—is the consciousness of the workings of desire within ourselves. Thus, we might say that, if sagely perception is distinguished by a higher knowing that is free from the disturbances of certain kinds of sensual desire, it is also defined by a constant state of desire—one that seeks to apprehend and embody the potent force of the Dao. The sage becomes an object of his own knowing. To this extent, desire is the very force that gives birth to the self-conscious human being.²⁵

“FOR THE BELLY BUT NOT FOR THE EYE”: MASTERING
“SATISFACTION” IN AN AGE OF CIVILIZATION

Basic to the understanding of desire in the *Laozi* is a distinction between ordinary desire and the higher forms of desire that pertain to the sage. It is the ordinary desire that is so strongly denounced in this text. But this ordinary desire

25. There are some interesting parallels with Hegel here. In the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wrote famously that “self-consciousness is *desire* in general.” As Kojève and Queneau have noted, desire can be seen as giving rise to self-consciousness in its very act of negating the present reality. This is not negation in the sense of affirming a “pure nothingness,” but the coming into being of a “negating I that *transforms* Being and creates a new being by destroying the given being.” Alexander Kojève and Raymond Queneau, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 38.

is itself of a particular sort. It is the desire bound up with the senses of hearing, sight, and taste:

The five colors make man's eyes blind;
The five notes make his ears deaf;
The five tastes injure his palate. [ch. 12]²⁶

What is the problem with colors, notes, and tastes, and why do they block the proper workings of the eyes, ears, and palate? The text suggests that the basic problem lies in the human body's susceptibility to invite sources of its own distress. "The reason I have great trouble," we learn in chapter 13, "is that I have a body (*shen* 身). When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?"

But the issue is more specific than this. It is not a general condemnation of engaging with material reality, *per se*. The *Laozi* does not reject the physical world as such, or seek to locate some true self in a transcendent, nonbodily realm. Rather, this particular selection of dangers represents the indulgences of the ruling class—their love of dazzling finery, sumptuous music, and flavorful cuisine. The *Daodejing's* condemnation of desire is thus a condemnation of the unrestrained sensual desires of the rich and powerful who, in their insatiable pursuit of pleasure, have made such a mess of the world. It is to these desires that can be attributed the world's most pressing problems—warfare, violence, and widespread misery. And these are the main objects of concern in this text.

These sensual desires bear further analysis. First, they represent desire for *unnatural* things—things that are created (*zuo* 作) by the "sharp" tools and ingenuity of civilized life.²⁷ Second, insofar as such sensual desires are not inherent to the natural human being, but are aroused by external things, they signal our vulnerability and passivity to things beyond our control. They are, thus, fundamentally different from those natural desires—such as the craving for food, sex, and the basic requirements of physical comfort—that are part of our constitution and that propel us toward fulfillment. And third, these sensual desires differ from more natural forms of desire insofar as they can never be satisfied; they endlessly reproduce themselves, leading one to constantly yearn for new sources of pleasure and delight. They are incompatible, then, with the basic human drive for contentment, which depends on the possibility of satisfaction. In short, by giving rise to the proliferation of luxurious goods that ensnare the senses, civilization has produced a malady of incessant desire that leaves people in a constant state of dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Civilization breeds dissatisfaction in other ways beyond its arousal of desire for material acquisition. It also creates "moral" objects of desire in the form of

26. *Daodejing* 12/6a/2–3.

27. On the debate over the legitimacy of *zuo* between proponents of "nature" and "artifice" as the proper basis for ordering society, see Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*.

artificial constructs of virtue that divert people from the proper goals of life. Here, we see an unveiled attack against the very institutions and virtues that Confucius had extolled as the great achievements of civilization: (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), filiality (*xiao* 孝), and loyalty (*zhong* 忠):

When the Great Dao (*da dao* 大道) is discarded,
 We have Humaneness and Rightness;
 When Wisdom (*zhi* 智) and Intelligence (*hui* 慧) emerge,
 We have Great Artifice (*da wei* 大偽);
 When the six relations are discordant,
 We have Filiality and Benevolent Affection;
 When the state is benighted,
 We have loyal ministers. [ch. 18]²⁸

According to the *Daodejing*, the very existence of such norms is symptomatic of a world gone wrong. It is only when we lose sight of the Dao that reified categories of “Benevolence” and “Rightness” come into being. It is only when chaos and discord reign among the people that normative virtues such as “Filiality” and “Benevolent Affection” emerge. It is only when we have fixed notions of “Wisdom” and “Intelligence” that hypocrisy and bad faith become possible. As with material objects, these artificially created normative objects of desire are the source of all the crime, violence, and suffering in the world:

The more taboos there are in the empire
 The poorer the people;
 The more sharpened tools the people have
 The more benighted the state;
 The more skills the people have
 The further novelties multiply;
 The better known the laws and edicts
 The more thieves and robbers there are. [ch. 57]²⁹

The so-called achievements of civilization, in short, fail to live up to their promise of satisfying basic and natural human desires, and of helping human beings realize themselves, both individually and collectively. Instead, they exacerbate the problems they were meant to alleviate, and end up by breeding discontent within the self and destroying society in the process. This is why the sage-ruler responds to the arousal of sensual desire in the people (*yu zuo* 欲作) by “press[ing] down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block” [ch. 37]. By such means, he helps to bring about a world in which people no longer contend

28. *Daodejing* 18/9a/5–8.

29. *Daodejing* 57/10a/7–11.

with one another for gain, but coexist happily; one in which they no longer judge and admonish each other with fixed ideas about “Sageliness” and “Wisdom,” “Benevolence” and “Rightness,” but simply live and let live. In a world without the hierarchies, artificial distinctions, and codified norms created by civilization, people would correct themselves of their own accord and coexist in peace and harmony. This, the *Laozi* claims, is the Dao of all things and the proper course for human beings.

The ideal world, then, is a state before civilization—one in which people can pursue the simple and natural mode of existence they had enjoyed in the “state of nature.” It is the task of the ruler to foster the conditions in which people can satisfy their natural desires and live in peace and contentment:

Bring it about that the people will return to the use of the knotted rope,
Will find relish in their food
And beauty in their clothes,
Will be content in their abode
And happy in the way they live. [ch. 80]³⁰

It is the realization of such a world in which people know contentment (*zhi zu* 知足) that is the political responsibility of the sage-ruler in the *Laozi*.

The principle that “satisfaction” is incompatible with human civilization directly challenges the Confucian idea that the institutions created by civilization are necessary for taming, channeling, and fulfilling people’s basic emotional inclinations, and leading them to the full realization of their human potential. The *Laozi*’s counterclaim is that this civilization is not the solution but the cause of the problem of unrestrained and self-destructive human desires. With their preoccupation with refinement and ceremony, the Confucians have dazzled the eyes with new objects of desire, and have created a taste for refined and hard-to-attain luxuries. This is why it is necessary to “Block the openings / Shut the doors,” thereby cutting off the channels of desire. To achieve satisfaction in life, we must put into practice the seemingly paradoxical insight that striving for less will eventually give us more:

Know when to stop
And you will meet with no danger.
You can then endure (*chang jiu* 長久).[ch 44]³¹

“Knowing when to stop” not only helps us to achieve a more satisfying life, it is also necessary for our very survival. Curbing our desires can save us from self-destruction and an untimely death.

30. *Daodejing* 80/20b/4–6.

31. *Daodejing* 44/4b/6–7.

The tension between civilization and emotional fulfillment is a theme that a number of influential thinkers have taken up. Closer to our own era, Sigmund Freud has probed, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, the relationship between civilization and the human psyche, and locates the roots of human discontent in the forms of civilized life. Civilization (*Kultur*), in Freud's account, is "the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes—namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations."³² This civilization, he claims, has a paradoxical relationship to the human quest for happiness: created by humans in order to alleviate the deepest sources of their unhappiness and suffering, it has turned out to be the primary cause of their own misery. Causing them to repress their natural desires, it has made it impossible for them to truly satisfy their basic instinct for pleasure and happiness.

The *Daodejing*, as we have seen, does not strictly oppose some notion of happiness and the satisfaction of desire with civilization; while civilization is the underlying cause of human suffering and discontent, the reason for this not that it represses natural desires, but that it creates "artificial" ones that can never be satisfied. It is the yearning for these new and artificial objects of desire that causes people to become blind to their natural and legitimate desires, and to pursue a mode of life that destroys themselves and the world in the process. To fully live out one's years in a state of satisfaction and contentment, one must not value "goods hard to come by." This is as true for the aspiring sage as it is for the common people. But the sage-ruler desires in a manner that befits rulers, which goes far beyond attending to his physical need to fill his belly and satisfy his sexual yearnings. He partakes of the universal desire of rulers to survive and endure politically in the world. But because he is a sage, he rules in accordance with the Dao, and this requires the ability to understand the workings of desire. It is in its crucial connection to the meaning of true knowledge—knowledge of how things are—that desire comes to acquire an even higher level of significance.

Sagely awareness consists of several things. It entails recognizing that being without desire is the means by which to fulfill one's own desires. The sage, arguably, is the person most adept at fulfilling his own desires: the sage is one who has perfected the art of fulfillment. As Hans-Georg Moeller has proposed, the *Daodejing* is fundamentally concerned with how best to satisfy one's desires and achieve happiness in life. That is, despite its advocacy of desirelessness and rejection of the senses and emotions, it is still fundamentally and explicitly concerned with getting what one wants in life. Accordingly, the central ethical goal of the text, as Moeller has put it, is the "mastery of satisfaction," or *zhi zu* 知足.³³ "One who masters satisfaction is rich" (*fu* 富), it is declared in chapter 33.

32. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).

33. Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 87–97.

But it is also important to emphasize that, if the sage can “master satisfaction,” it is only because he possesses higher forms of awareness that enable him to transcend the push and pull of emotional disturbances arising from sensory contact with the world. The sage knows, for instance, that the fulfillment of his own desire to “attain his private ends” (*cheng qi si* 成其私) rests on his ability to satisfy the desires of the people, while restraining his own desires and keeping them out of view. That he possesses insight into the workings of human desire is what enables him to manage and fulfill the desires of the people in such a way that they will be content, self-sufficient, and compliant:

Hence the sage says,
I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves;
I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves;
I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves;
I am free from sensual desire and the people of themselves become simple
like the uncarved block.[ch. 57]³⁴

Rather than trying to manage and direct the people, he leaves them be; rather than being solicitous for their well-being, he remains detached and affectionless.

This strategy is not without its sinister dimensions: to achieve his goal of bringing about a contented populace, the sage “empties their minds” (*xu qi xin* 虛其心) and “fills their bellies” (*shi qi fu* 實其腹), and brings it about that they are “without knowledge and without desire” so that they do not dare to act [ch. 3].³⁵ The sage, then, satisfies the desires of the people, not so much out of concern for their well-being so much as out of a recognition that his continued survival and well-being depend on it. For it is only in satisfying the people that they will not seek to disrupt the status quo or challenge the ruler’s authority. But it is also the case that the very mechanism for satisfying one’s own political desires is what makes possible the creation of a political order in which the people will know contentment. The two objectives come together in a more general strategy of promoting a world in which all people can achieve their optimal realization.

Ultimately, if the sage is a master of fulfillment, both personal and collective, it is because he possesses insight into the workings of desire. This enables him to distinguish between ordinary desires and more optimal forms of desire that are necessary for achieving higher levels of contentment and satisfaction. The sage, then, does not simply limit his own sensual desires; he also reflects upon them in a self-conscious manner—he is one who “desires not to desire” (*yu bu yu* 欲不欲) [ch. 64].³⁶ It is the awareness of the very mechanism of desire, in himself and in others, that marks the special intelligence of the sage and displays his insight into

34. *Daodejing* 57/10b/2–5.

35. *Daodejing* 3/2a/9–12. Cf. *Daodejing* 49/6a/6–12.

36. *Daodejing* 64/14a/5–6.

the Dao. Ultimately, this is what allows him to embody the potent force of the Dao itself.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE HIGHER KNOWING OF THE SAGE

I have been proposing that the sage-ruler's capacity to achieve personal satisfaction, and to bring about the satisfaction of his people, depends on his ability to understand what I have referred to as the "workings" and the "mechanism" of desire. These terms have scientific and technical connotations implying a dynamic, intelligible mode of functioning. This choice of vocabulary is deliberate. My argument is that, embedded in the basic vision of the *Daodejing* is a certain naturalistic orientation—one that seeks objective knowledge of what the world is truly like, assumes that the world functions in intelligible ways, and conceives the highest form of human knowing as having access to these workings. Moreover, it is this understanding that enables the sage to master and optimize his circumstances.

The question of "naturalism" is a particularly contentious one in the context of the *Daodejing*, where the issue has often been approached as part of a debate over the possible links between "Daoist" thought and science. Over half a century ago, Joseph Needham characterized "Daoism" as "'proto'-science," referring to what he considered to be a shared "Daoist" view that "human society could not be brought into order, as the Confucians strove to bring it, without a far greater knowledge and understanding of Nature outside and beyond human society."³⁷ Needham emphasized the way in which the *Daodejing* criticized the "masculine and managing" forms of knowledge created by Confucians, and pursued a "feminine and receptive knowledge which could only arise as the fruit of a passive and yielding attitude in the observation of Nature."³⁸ On the other side of this debate, Benjamin Schwartz rejected the idea that the *Daodejing* could be read in this way; citing its rejection of cumulative knowledge and sensory perception as legitimate sources of true insight about the world, he asserted that "the systematic and careful 'scientific' observation of nature would seem to be precisely one of those highly deliberate, calculating and intentional projects which in no way corresponds to the spirit of *wuwei*."³⁹

These opposing positions underscore the importance of specifying more precisely what might be the relevant attributes to bring up in a discussion of the naturalistic or scientific aspects of a given text. As I have described in the introduction, the central issue in connection to the naturalism of the early mainstream tradition is an emergent conception of the world in terms of intelligible patterns,

37. Needham, *Science and Civilization*, 33.

38. Ibid.

39. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 205.

workings, and causal relationships, and the implications of such a conception for how human beings should live and act in the world. These concerns are evident in the *Daodejing*, which provides an account of how the world works, at the level of the cosmos, the human body and psyche, and the state. The text also defines the highest form of knowledge as the capacity to understand the complex dynamics of each of these realms. What is more specific to the *Daodejing* in particular, however, is the connection made between knowledge and desire, which pervades and structures all three levels of knowing. Knowledge and desire do not represent fundamentally different forms of reasoning but, rather, come together in the optimal realization of the human being.

It may not be obvious that the *Daodejing* even assumes that knowledge is possible, or that knowledge possess any ultimate value. The text contains several passages that challenge the very idea of knowledge and the possibility of making progress in that domain. For instance, a passage in chapter 71 states: “To know yet to think that one does not know is best; Not to know yet to think that one knows will lead to difficulty.”⁴⁰ It claims, moreover, that “those who know do not speak” and “those who speak do not know.”⁴¹ The contrast between this approach and the rather straightforward perspective of knowing given in the *Analects* is striking. Confucius once explained to a disciple that “knowing” means “recognizing knowing as knowing and not knowing as not knowing” [*Analects* 2.17].⁴² He regarded the senses as a reliable source of knowledge, and was confident in the human ability to “know others” through their outer “traces”—including their emotions.

Apart from unsettling conventional forms of *zhi* 知, or knowing, the *Laozi* also invokes the image of the sage as empty and devoid of intelligence:

My mind is that of a fool (*yu ren zhi xin* 愚人之心) — how blank!
 The common people are clear (*zhao zhao* 昭昭).
 I alone am dim (*hun* 昏).
 The common people are alert (*cha cha* 察察).
 I alone am muddled (*men men* 悶悶).
 Calm like the sea;
 Like a high wind that never ceases.
 The multitude all have a purpose (*you yi* 有以).
 I alone am foolish and uncouth (*wan si bi* 頑似鄙).
 I alone am different from others
 And value being fed by the mother. [ch. 20]⁴³

40. *Daodejing* 71/17a/4.

41. *Daodejing* 56/9b/6.

42. *ICS Lunyu* 2.17/4/1.

43. *Daodejing* 20/10a/7–13.

The mind of the sage, here, is described unambiguously as “that of a fool” (*yu ren* 愚人): it is “blank” (*dun dun* 沌沌) and “muddled” (*hun* 昏). By contrast, the mind of the common people is “alert” (察察) and possesses a “sense of purpose” (*you yi* 有以).

All of this does not mean, however, that no knowledge is possible at all, or that all claims to knowledge are relative. The text merely unsettles conventional knowledge and the ordinary means by which people arrive at it—most notably, sense perception. And it does so by highlighting the limits of language and challenging established norms and constructs. That sagely knowing is foolish and muddled means that it remains in the state of wholeness before language and conscious thought separate reality into oppositional categories. The sage continues to be “nourished by the mother” (*shi mu* 食母) and embodies the state of the “uncarved block.” He is so un-self-aware that he relinquishes his own “constant mind” and adopts the “mind of the people” [ch. 49].⁴⁴

Very much in the manner of how the text rejects conventional forms of desire and then proposes more legitimate, or higher, ones, so does it repudiate conventional knowing to unveil higher processes of knowing. The parallel between the discourse of desire and the discourse of knowing continues. We see, for instance, that the sage’s apparent lack of perspicacity is matched by a lack of emotions. The sage is one who returns to his original and natural state at birth, in which emotions have not even taken shape at all: he is “like a baby that has not yet learned to smile.”⁴⁵ The sage, moreover, is presented as a “lonely” and “orphaned” figure [ch. 39]⁴⁶ who has no emotional ties that would connect him to the world of others. Devoid of the context of family and society, the orphaned Daoist sage seems to lack some qualities that are arguably essential to what it is to be human. He is the most unself-conscious person of all—one whose self is defined precisely by his *lack* of a sense of self. With none of the identifiable markers of humanity, the sagely ideal of the *Daodejing* seems to dissolve into the undifferentiated fabric of the cosmos itself. And so, perhaps not surprisingly, the sage is also deemed to be “not humane” (*bu ren* 不仁):

Heaven and earth are *bu ren*, and treat the myriad creatures as
straw dogs;

The sage is *bu ren* and treats the people as straw dogs. [ch. 5]⁴⁷

In light of such passages, on what grounds can we speak of the higher awareness of the sage? Hans-Georg Moeller has characterized the sagely ideal

44. *Daodejing* 49/6a/6.

45. *Daodejing* 20/10a/5.

46. *Daodejing* 39/2b/3.

47. *Daodejing* 5/3a/3.

of the *Daodejing* as “anti-humanist.” He emphasizes the lack of affective concern implied in the notion of *bu ren* by translating it as “not caring”: “Heaven and earth do not ‘care’—and neither does the Daoist sage in the *Laozi*.”⁴⁸ In my reading, the sage is not so much “anti-humane” or “ruthless” so much as simply “not Humane” in the way that the Confucians have built up the concept of *ren*. Like other virtues whose reified meanings the text seeks to unsettle, *ren* is a virtue whose true meaning has been lost. If the authors of the text had had at their disposal modern punctuation, the above line might read, “The sage is not ‘Humane,’” in reference to the sage’s rejection of the conventional norms attached to *ren*. To say that the sage is *bu ren*, then, would suggest that he is detached from ordinary human emotions and forms of knowing. The sage would treat the myriad creatures as “straw dogs” in the sense that he regards them as they are, with no deference to conventional norms and practices. In the case of knowledge, then, the thrust of the *Daodejing*’s concern is to achieve higher understanding that is not bound by the immediate senses, and that can access the full nature of reality in all its unity and complexity. This is how we arrive at the seemingly paradoxical situation in which:

Without leaving one’s gate,
One knows the whole world (*zhi tian xia* 知天下);
Without looking out the window
One sees the way of heaven (*jian tian dao* 見天道).
The further one goes
The less one knows.
Therefore the sage knows without having to stir (*bu xing er zhi* 不行而知),
Identifies without having to see (*bu jian er ming* 不見而名),
Accomplishes without having to act. (*bu wei er cheng* 不為而成). [ch. 47]⁴⁹

The sage “knows,” but what he knows is complex and of a higher order than what can be grasped by ordinary intelligence. He possesses, among other things, psychological insight into others and into his own self by virtue of his understanding and experience of the workings of desire. The sagely gaze is directed toward the world of human motivation and desire—toward what makes them tick, what brings them satisfaction:

He who knows others is wise (*zhi ren zhe zhi* 知人者智);
He who knows himself has perspicacity (*zhi zhi zhe ming* 自知者明).
He who overcomes others has force (*sheng ren zhe you li* 勝人者有力);
He who overcomes himself is strong (*zi sheng zhe qiang* 自勝者強).

48. Moeller, *Philosophy of Daodejing*, 139. D. C. Lau’s translation takes things to an extreme in rendering *bu ren* as “ruthless.”

49. *Daodejing* 47/5b/3–7.

He who knows contentment is rich (*zhi zu zhe fu* 知足者富);
 He who perseveres is a man of purpose (*qiang xing zhe you zhi*
 強行者有志);
 He who does not lose his station will endure (*bu shi qi suo zhe jiu* 不失其
 所者久);
 He who lives out his days has a long life (*si er bu wang zhe shou* 死而不亡
 者壽). [ch. 33]⁵⁰

The three forms of knowing given here—mastering knowledge of others (*zhi ren* 知人), mastering knowledge of the self (*zi zhi* 自知), and mastering satisfaction (*zhi zu* 知足)—translate directly into success, survival, and long life. They affirm the general importance in this text of achieving long-term well-being. From the other passages we have seen, we can deduce that these forms of knowing involve knowledge of the workings of desire, and therefore, that understanding desire, in a phenomenological and descriptive way, is what it means to grasp the inner dynamics of human beings. It is through the attainment of detached and “objective” knowledge of human feelings and desires that one gets what one truly desires in the world.

COSMIC DESIRE AND HUMAN KNOWING

Sagely intelligence, however, seeks not only to understand the workings of human psyche and behavior. It also seeks to apprehend the workings of the cosmos in its patterned regularity, unity, and utmost potency:

I do my utmost to attain emptiness (*xu* 虛);
 I hold firmly to stillness (*jing* 靜).
 The myriad creatures all rise (*zuo* 作) together
 And I observe (*guan* 觀) their return (*gui* 歸).
 The teaming creatures
 All return to their separate roots (*ge fu gui qi gen* 各復歸其根).
 Returning to one's roots is known as stillness (*jing* 靜).
 This is what is meant by returning to one's destiny (*fu ming* 復命).
 Returning to one's destiny is known as the constant (*chang* 常).
 Knowing the constant (*zhi chang* 知常) is known as perspicacity (*ming* 明)
 (ch 16).⁵¹

Implicit in the account given here is a cosmogony that explains how things in the world come into being and pass away. In this passage, it is observed that all

50. *Daodejing* 33/17a/4–8. I have modified Lau's translation of *zhi* 智 from “clever” to “wise,” and his translation of *ming* 明 from “discernment” to “perspicacity.”

51. *Daodejing* 16/8a/7–8b/1. Cf. *Daodejing* 70/16b/7–11 for a more positive and straightforward account of what the sage knows, and of the failure of people to understand his teachings.

things “return to their roots” (歸其根), that this is a matter of “returning to one’s destiny” (*fu ming* 復命), and that the pattern is constant (*chang* 常). The cosmos operates according to cyclical, regular, and intelligible patterns.

But the passage is of further interest: it gives not only an account of the cosmos but also the cosmos in connection with the knowing intelligence of the sage. The picture we are shown is one of the sage beholding the cosmos unfolding before his eyes. The description of the cosmos occurs in the context of the sage’s act of “observing” (*guan* 觀) all these things taking place. What makes this observation possible is his “perspicacity” (*ming* 明)—a heightened capacity for perception that, being empty and still, can fathom the pattern of cosmic unfolding. The passage, then, makes a double claim: first, that the cosmos works according to a regular, cyclical pattern; and second, that the capacity to intuit this pattern is the mark of sagely intelligence. The sage, having achieved the optimal forms of knowing, perceives how things truly are in the world: he has objective insight into the patterned workings of the cosmos itself. Although the *Laozi* clearly does not advocate a systematic, empirical, and cumulative investigation of the natural world, it nevertheless promotes the aspiration to a higher knowledge of the natural workings of things. This knowledge is the very standard of sagely knowing itself.

The cosmology of the *Laozi* possesses other important attributes that implicate sagely knowing. It explains the dynamics of the world in terms of the interaction of oppositional, but interdependent, categorical pairs: nonexistence (*wu* 無) and existence (*you* 有), empty and full, weak and strong, soft and hard, passive and active, female and male.⁵² This cosmogony, however, is one of birth and origination, rather than of the interaction of oppositions. There is an ultimate source from which all things arise, and this source is the “negative” member of the pair—the realm of nonexistence, the empty, the weak, the soft, the passive, the female:

The myriad creatures of the world are born from Existence,
Existence is born from Non-existence. [ch.40]⁵³

The generative model of the cosmos in the *Daodejing* is thus a single-origin model, and ultimately, the source of all things is the Dao itself:

The *Dao* gives birth to One,
One gives birth to Two,
Two gives birth to Three,
Three gives birth to the myriad things. [ch. 42]⁵⁴

52. For a survey of the different theories forward to explain the oppositions in the *Daodejing*, and an argument supporting the priority of the negative (indicated as “abiding by the soft”), see D. C. Lau, “The Treatment of Opposites in ‘Lao Tzu’ 老子,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21, no. 1/3 (1958): 344–360.

53. *Daodejing* 40/2b/10–3a/1.

54. *Daodejing* 43/3b/6–8.

The identity of the Dao as the origin of all things is conveyed through alluring, fecund, feminine imagery. It is the female that is ontologically prior—the “mother” (*mu* 母) of all things, the source from which all things arise, the place where “the entire world converges”:

The spirit of the valley (*gu shen* 谷神) never dies.

This is called the mysterious female (*xuan pin* 玄牝).

The gateway of the mysterious female Is called the root of heaven and earth (*tian di gen* 天地根).

Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there,

Yet use will never drain it. [ch. 6]⁵⁵

It is the “mysterious female” (*xuan pin* 玄牝) that is the “root of heaven and earth” (*tian di gen* 天地根) and the origin from which all things spring. It is thus in terms of the “negative” of the ontological pair of nonexistence and existence that we can explain how things work in the world—how they arise and develop, how they interact, how they ultimately pass away. It is also the female, rather than the male, that possesses greater potency: the female “gets the better of the male through stillness” and knows to “take the lower position” [ch. 61].⁵⁶ It is the female, representing the realm of emptiness, that represents the potent space of production; thus, it is empty space, rather than the things in it, that endows function (*yong* 用) to a vessel, a room, a wheel hub. And it is the female, the domain of nonexistence, that is the attractive force that makes the cosmos a dynamic rather than a static place. Ultimately, the female force accounts for how all things, in all their multiplicity and diversity, are a unity.

The productive cosmic force of nonexistence, or *wu* 無, has its counterpart in the potent force of desire, which is similarly conceived as the source and energy that animates the world, bringing about life, movement, and change. In this way, desire is embedded in the very structure of the *Laozi*’s vision of the world. This has direct implications for the vision of the sage. Sagely desire, optimally realized, functions in many ways as the human counterpart to the cosmic workings of nonexistence. The logic and workings of nonexistence thus provides a paradigm for sagely conduct.

This emerges in the seemingly paradoxical and counterintuitive idea that getting what one wants in the world requires that one *not* act. The point is not that we must literally do *nothing* but that we must refrain from engaging in self-conscious, deliberate actions (*wei* 偽) that assert themselves over what is spontaneous. It is about allowing the natural workings of things to unfold on their own so that “One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone.” [ch. 48]⁵⁷ While ordinary people

55. *Daodejing* 6/3b/1–6.

56. *Daodejing* 61/12a/6–8.

57. *Daodejing* 48/6a/2.

prefer the realm of existence, the sage pursues nonexistence. While ordinary people pursue strength over weakness, domination over submission, life over death, fullness over emptiness, the male over the female, the sage sees through these false hierarchies and understands that “the superior must have the inferior as root” and that “the high must have the low as base” [ch. 39].⁵⁸

Strategically, this means that getting what one truly desires in the world—such things as power, survival, and well-being—requires eradicating certain forms of desire and therefore *not* pursuing, self-consciously and deliberately, the objects of one’s desires. This means understanding that it is by giving people what they desire—rather than competing with them for resources—that they can be most effectively disarmed and pacified. It is by keeping them well-fed and uneducated that they will not entertain other forms of desire that might lead them to contend for power and challenge the authority of the ruler. By having no desires of his own, the sage-ruler takes “no action” and nevertheless people come to “transform themselves” (*zi hua* 自化) [ch. 57].⁵⁹ The nonaction of *wuwei* is the most efficacious form of action. This is because the sage knows that “The most submissive thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world” [ch. 43].⁶⁰ He therefore survives and achieves his ends by being passive, by playing the “female” rather than the “male,” by assuming the lower position rather than the higher, by following rather than leading, by retreating rather than advancing, and by showing weakness rather than strength. The sage, by being a “valley to the empire,” preserves his “constant efficacy” (*chang de* 常德) [ch 28].⁶¹

This ethics of negativity is played out in the dynamic workings of sagely perception. Most basically, if the force of the Dao lies in its emptiness or negation, then it does not reveal itself in the realm of existence, to be grasped in full clarity. Its nature is to be hidden from us: “As a thing the Way is / Shadowy and indistinct” [ch. 21].⁶² Nor can we fathom it through the normal workings of our senses, since it is “without substance” (*wu wu* 無物) and “without shape” (*wu zhuang* 無狀):

Its upper part is not dazzling;
Its lower part is not obscure.
Dimly visible, it cannot be named
And returns to that which is without substance (*wu wu* 無物).

58. *Daodejing* 39/2b/2.

59. *Daodejing* 57/10b/2.

60. *Daodejing* 43/4a/7.

61. *Daodejing* 28/14b/6–7. Here I follow Hans-Georg Moeller’s rendering of *de* as “efficacy,” which recognizes the term’s breadth of scope in the *Laozi* to encompass a more naturalistic sense of term as a kind of potency and power rather than simply a kind of moral virtue, in the Confucian sense.

62. *Daodejing* 21/10b/6.

This is called the shape that has no shape (*wu zhuang zhi zhuang* 無狀之狀),
 The image that is without substance.
 This is called indistinct and shadowy.
 Go up to it and you will not see its head;
 Follow behind it and you will not see its rear. [ch. 14]⁶³

The great square has no corners.
 The great vessel takes long to complete;
 The great note is rarefied in sound;
 The great image has no shape.
 The way conceals itself in being nameless. [ch. 41].⁶⁴

But if the Way has no shape, sound, or name, how are we to apprehend it? As noted earlier, among the numerous proposals put forward by scholars in interpreting the opening passage on desire was the idea that the structure of paradox itself could be a vehicle through which to grasp the otherwise ineffable Dao. Scholars like Philip J. Ivanhoe, Roger Ames, and David Hall have proposed that paradox could, out of the logical contradiction it created, activate other, affective faculties of understanding.

I agree with Ivanhoe and others that “higher levels” of knowing can be accessed through the triggering of affective experience, and even more specifically, through tapping into the workings of desire. But I would not necessarily characterize the process as one of proceeding through the text’s use of paradoxes to “exhaust our rational nature and loosen its grip on us” by way of its “enchanting and lyrical quality.”⁶⁵ The *Daodejing*’s engagement of desire does not so much transcend reason as make evident the limits of propositional forms of knowing, and guide the intellect toward higher levels of knowing. The text thus unsettles, but does not subvert, the reasoned processes of sagely knowing. All that is unsettled are conventional forms of knowing, reified constructs, and certain traditional modes of argumentation. What we have, then, is a vision of sagely knowing that represents not a retreat from reason but an optimal realization of one’s cognitive and rational faculties. The contradictions within the text are thus only apparent, and dissolve when considered from a higher vantage point. They are not genuine paradoxes.

In this case, how does desire work as a cognitive force? I propose that, embedded in the *ontos* of negativity that grounds the text, is a recognition of the evocative power of negation. This is where the potency of the text lies: in its invoking of a Dao that cannot be captured in words, but that can be fathomed through the activation of desire. If the emptiness of a vessel invites filling and completion, the

63. *Daodejing* 14/7a/5–7b/1.

64. *Daodejing* 41/3b/1–3.

65. Laozi, *Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. Ivanhoe, xxviii.

text, too, works by drawing forth the response of one who seeks higher understanding of the Dao. The “teachings” of this text are thus not transmitted so much as *evoked*, and its truths are the truths that can be grasped by the knowing intellect. The text, then, is a site of desire: like the “mysterious female” and the “spirit of the valley,” it invites knowing through the attractive force of an emptiness that seeks to be entered and filled. Like the vessel of the Dao that can never be filled, the sagely knower who pursues the Dao “does not desire fullness” (*bu yu ying* 不欲盈) [ch.15]⁶⁶ but “strives for utmost emptiness” (*zhi xu ji* 致虛極) [ch 16].⁶⁷ This is why the Dao is ultimately unnamable, and can only be grasped through the activated desire of those who seek it.

We might, in this respect, find a structural parallel with an idea put forth by Roland Barthes—the idea of the text as a site of erotic practice. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes called attention to the fact that relationship between the text and reader is one of active interdependence. Breaking down traditional notions of reading, which assume that the text is “representational” and therefore self-standing and self-sufficient, Barthes proposed that a text *calls forth* a human participant. This is what makes reading an “erotic” practice.⁶⁸ Without pushing the comparison too much, the idea of the text as an erotic site that summons a particular kind of subject can, I think, be productively invoked to convey a crucial feature of the workings of desire in the *Laozi*—namely, the way in which the “shadowy,” indistinct contours of a Dao that cannot be named evokes a desire to apprehend it. Desire begets desire, and this desire in response to the attractive force of the Dao calls into being a particular kind of human subject—one who possesses perspicacious intelligence that is capable of understanding “the teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action”—teachings that are beyond the reach of all but a rare few [ch. 43].⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

Confronting a world being torn apart by the wrong forms of desire, the *Daodejing* offers a vision for restoring peace and order, and ensuring a life of contentment to all. The authority of this vision is premised on a complex and multivalent account of the human psyche that recognizes desire as a natural part of the human condition. The text proceeds by establishing, on new grounds, a proper place for desire. It rejects certain forms of desires—those that are passive, artificial, and sensually driven—but recognizes the importance of others, such as the desire for food, comfort, and fulfillment. Its apparently paradoxical, contradictory claims about

66. *Daodejing* 15/8a/4.

67. *Daodejing* 16/8a/7.

68. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

69. *Daodejing* 43/4a/8–10.

desire can thus be read as part of a strategy to distinguish between problematic, harmful desires that obstruct our attainment of satisfaction, and natural, inherent ones that ought to be satisfied. As an inner force requiring fulfillment and satisfaction, desire becomes a normative force: a life well lived is inconceivable without desire significantly coming into play, and it is in the satisfaction of these desires that we can achieve optimal fulfillment of our human constitution.

The normativity of desire is premised on a cosmic link that unites the workings of human desire with the creative forces of the natural world. As a counterpart to the cosmic process of production and transformation, desire is the hidden force that moves and animates the world, as well as the human psyche. It thus plays a crucial role in establishing that, like the cosmic process itself, the human realm operates according to an intelligible mechanism. The truly realized person is not vulnerable to the push and pull of external things like ordinary people, but possesses within herself a drive towards optimal fulfillment. Moreover, we have seen that the proper fulfillment of human potentiality, as exemplified by the figure of the sage, involves the mastery of one's situation in the world, which depends on a higher understanding of how things are. True and objective knowledge thus becomes a central priority of the sage, who understands that the secret to lasting life and power is insight into the workings of the world, and into the methods for best deploying this knowledge.

All this has crucial implications for the very conception of knowledge in the *Daodejing*. Envisioned as a form of desire, knowledge becomes a moving, dynamic force, the object of which is a more profound grasp of the workings of desire itself. Compared with the "feminine" force of receptivity from which emerges all life and movement, the quest for knowledge becomes a kind of "erotic" search for the true nature of reality. Emanating from deep within oneself, and directed at the hidden mechanisms that drive the world, this drive to achieve higher knowing is what allows the sage to fulfill her capacity for efficacious virtue (*de* 德) and realize her human agency in the world.

Human Nature and the Pattern of Moral Life in Mencius

Among the early mainstream thinkers, Mencius (Meng Ke 孟軻, or Mengzi 孟子, 372 BCE–289 BCE) has been most closely identified with an ethical theory based on emotions—that is, with an account of morality that ascribes the sources of moral direction to the innate workings of human emotions and desires. Mencius declared that human nature (*xing* 性) was good (*shan* 善), by which he meant that we all possessed, by virtue of our biological endowment, a propensity for goodness that was rooted in certain dispositional tendencies. In particular, we shared an innate propensity for “pity and compassion” (*ce yin* 惻隱), “shame and aversion” (*xiu wu* 羞惡), “courtesy and respect” (*gong jing* 恭敬), and a “sense of right and wrong” (*shi fei* 是非). These constituted what Mencius called the “four sprouts” (*si duan* 四端) of the basic human virtues of humaneness (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智). This sprouts theory was part of a more general conception of human beings as possessing a common structure of responsiveness based on innate preferences and aversions. Such preferences and aversions could explain where our moral norms and practices came from. They also held the key to the art of rulership, which for Mencius was largely about knowing how to win the hearts of the people and ensuring their livelihood and well-being.

In locating the origins of virtue in certain inborn dispositions, Mencius was not claiming that human beings naturally pursued virtue over other goods; indeed, perhaps the most glaring problem that confronted him was precisely the failure of people to act morally. Mencius was thus well aware that whatever inclination people had toward virtue had to be nurtured and cultivated if it was to lead to virtue and right conduct. What he was arguing, instead, was that human beings possessed a constitutionally innate potentiality for virtue, and that this potentiality needed to be actualized. Such a claim was forwarded as a rejoinder to those thinkers who argued that morality and goodness were just a matter of following external norms and models of conduct. In asserting that virtue represented the fulfillment of a biological disposition that all human beings possessed, Mencius provided grounds for refuting the idea that morality was simply a cultural construct superimposed on a person from the outside. At the same

time, in attributing morally inclined propensities to our inborn nature, Mencius was also proposing that there were certain qualities, rooted in our basic ways of responding to situations, that all normally functioning people possessed by virtue of being human. Our nature dictated how we ought to live, containing within itself an injunction to cultivate and fully realize our innate moral potentiality. To ignore or contravene it would be both wrong and detrimental to our well-being. Mencius, in other words, was making the bold argument that biology implied morality.

With respect to the role of emotions, the crucial point in all this is that Mencius's appeal to biology was part of a broader endeavor to theorize about the nature and workings of reality itself. This, in turn, corresponded to a methodology for arriving at ethical guidelines that were premised on the possibility of grasping the patterns and workings of the world. The emotions achieved heightened significance in this context; for our dispositions, representing a complex mixture of emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and evaluative processes, were part of a coherent structure of responsiveness that provided knowledge about others, about the world, and about ourselves. Mencius held that human beings, like the natural world itself, was characterized by certain intrinsic tendencies, as well by as an intelligible trajectory of development and standard of fulfillment. He found in the natural world a paradigm through which to understand how human beings could optimally realize themselves and pursue their goals.

Shifting our attention to the naturalistic dimensions of Mencius's thinking about emotions allows us, once again, to approach the problem of emotions outside the dichotomies of emotion versus reason, and subjectivity versus objectivity, that have been pervasive in many recent studies. It offers an alternative to the two main conclusions that scholars have drawn about the place of emotions in Mencius's ethical vision—namely, that Mencius regarded morality as a matter of reason controlling the emotions, or that he conceived them as rooted in emotions and desires. What it shows, instead, is a claim that the emotions, optimally realized, represent a vehicle through which human beings could know the world, embody its processes, and exercise their distinct forms of moral and practical agency.

NATURALIZING THE HUMAN IN THE FOURTH CENTURY BCE

A significant development in ethical debates around the fourth century BCE was the emergence of the human being as an object of naturalistic inquiry. This can be seen in the detailed accounts of self-cultivation that were proposed during this period, in which such concepts as *xing* 性 (human nature), *xin* 心 (the heart/mind), and *qing* 情 (emotions/patterned dispositions/underlying reality)

came into currency as basic terms of discussion. The preoccupation with such concepts in this period exemplifies a basic shift in concern towards the ethical and psychological dimensions of life.¹ This interest was part of a more general endeavor to understand reality in terms of its underlying patterns, processes, and mechanisms. The two realms of inquiry—the human and the cosmic—shared a common logic, structure, and orientation that would give a distinct shape to the conception of emotions in early China, and profoundly mark thinking about the self and the human being more generally. For, although moral philosophers like Mencius were not necessarily concerned with the technical details of naturalistic investigation, they nevertheless assumed that the workings of the natural world were relevant for understanding the workings of human beings as well. Mencius's appeal to natural imagery to ground his moral theory was thus more than analogical or illustrative; it also presupposed that ethics had to be grounded on a proper understanding of what things were like.

The quest to understand the workings of the world presupposed that the world was indeed knowable. This was itself a major step, and it corresponded to new standards of knowing that were more systematic and methodical, and geared toward revealing the patterned workings of the world.² In the fields of astronomy and calendar making, for instance, it is precisely between the fifth and third centuries BCE that we find detailed observations and models plotting the regular movements of the constellations, as well as their temporal charting in the form of elaborately worked-out calendars. There also emerged during this period the practice of hemerology, about which new evidence has recently come to light in form of recently excavated almanacs from the fourth and third centuries BCE. These texts suggest an interest in schematizing time and predicting the future in ways that were methodical and systematic. As Donald Harper summarizes this development:

It was in the context of the almanacs that new ideas took shape and changed how the elite viewed their world. They still sought guidance in

1. Erica Brindley has explored the significance of the emergent “psychological” discourse of the fourth and third centuries BCE in the context of music theory, in “Music and Cosmos in the Development of ‘Psychology’ in Early China,” *T'oung Pao* 92, nos. 1–3 (2006): 1–49.

2. Much of the rest of this section summarizes the main developments of early investigations of the natural world as discussed in Donald Harper, “Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought,” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China. From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 812–884. My understanding of the relationship between Warring States “masters of philosophy” and those thinkers engaged in the investigation of natural phenomena—astronomers, calendrical specialists, physicians, and so on—differs in a basic respect from that of Harper. Since Harper approaches the natural sciences as technical fields, he underplays the connection with philosophers who were not directly concerned with specialized investigations—often empirical—of the natural world, and sees their concerns as only indirectly related to the concerns of the ethical and political thinkers. Harper suggests that the former were interested in the workings of the natural world insofar as they provided “analogies” for supporting their particular philosophical arguments. I am concerned here with natural philosophy at the more general level of how thinkers engaged with the study of the natural world understood and modeled its workings. Given this approach, I propose that there was a closer link between the domains of natural and ethical philosophy than scholars have tended to acknowledge.

turtle and milfoil divination, but hemerology routinized decision making in ways that older forms of divination had not. The cycle of time expressed in the numerological systems of the calendar made fortune and misfortune predictable even without divination, and the calendar encouraged belief in a knowable world.³

While the movements of the celestial bodies and the passage of time were being charted with greater precision and regularity, other developments were taking place during this period that reflected an interest in rendering the world more comprehensible. The *Zhou yi* 周易 (The Changes of Zhou) was now starting to be used as a guidebook, not only by divination specialists but also by philosophers such as Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE) and his followers.⁴ The realm of the ancestors and spirits, which had previously been connected to the world of the living through divination and sacrificial practices, were now being absorbed into the astrological and calendrical systems, and thereby also domesticated and made amenable to human purposes.

Finally, fundamental changes were taking place in how people understood the foundations of reality itself—the material elements that composed it and the forces that animated it. Discussions about the nature and workings of *qi* 氣, the *wuxing* 五行 (Five Agents), and *yin* and *yang* were becoming more prevalent during this period, and although the system of correlations that bound the three together into a comprehensive, integrated system was only fully developed during the period of the Han Empire (206 BCE–220 CE), around the first century BCE, nevertheless there was a growing tendency to regard these entities as caught up in an intelligible dynamic of movement and change.

In the case of the *wuxing*—the five substances of earth, wood, metal, water, and fire, out of which all things were presumably composed—there appears to have been a shift in meaning from what we might call the Five Elements, focusing on their material composition, to the Five Phases, which signaled rather their role within a cyclical process of change. Whether the *xing* of *wuxing* is properly translated as “Element” or “Phase” seems rather a moot point, since the understanding of *wuxing* underwent important changes, and the effort to universalize the “Five Phases” as the proper translation seeks to impose Han Dynasty ideas about *wuxing* onto earlier thought. What is important for this discussion is the point at which the *wuxing*, as an inert material substance, came to be conceived as endowed with dynamic properties.

Addressing the issue of translation, Marc Kalinowski has proposed that the *wuxing* might be best rendered as Five Agents to capture the fact that, even as

3. Harper, “Warring States Natural Philosophy,” 832–833.

4. On this, see Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Zhouyi jingzhuan suyuan* 周易經傳溯源 (Changchun: Changchun, 1992), cited in Harper, “Warring States Natural Philosophy,” 854.

it became part of the phase-change model of the cosmos, the *xing* of *wuxing* nevertheless preserved the aspects of body (*ti* 體) and form (*xing* 形) alongside their functions.⁵ Kalinowski's rendering of *wuxing* as Five Agents is retained here because it captures both the earlier sense of *xing* as material substance and the later associations of dynamism, change, and movement. The Warring States was the critical period of transition in which the former gave way to the latter: each of the five material substances that constituted the *wuxing* also came to be recognized as possessing particular, characteristic tendencies. A passage about *wuxing* from the "Hong Fan" chapter of the *Shang Shu* (c. 400 BCE) is especially revealing:

The first is called Water, the second Fire, the third Wood, the fourth Metal, the fifth Soil. Of Water one says that it wets and descends, of Fire that it flames and rises, of Wood that it bends and straightens, of Metal that it conforms to change; Soil is sown and harvested.⁶

This passage identifies each substance and connects it with certain characteristic properties. The *wuxing* are thus more than material elements: they embody particular functions, movements, and changes. Understood in this way, the *wuxing* assumes a particular criterion of knowledge: to know what they are also involves knowing their tendencies and their trajectory of change.⁷

The emergence of the idea that things possess certain characteristic workings and dynamics amounts to more than just a change in thinking about what things in the world are like; it also has implications for understanding human beings. First, since the world is of interest to us insofar as we engage with it, the idea that things contain potentialities corresponds to different forms of human conduct vis-à-vis these things. In the case of the *wuxing*, this is most explicit in the example of soil (*tu* 土): the character of soil is such that it demands sowing and harvesting, thus inviting particular forms of human action based on this potentiality. Understanding how the world works confers agency to human beings to the extent that it places within their powers a capacity to optimize their conduct. This can be seen, for instance, in the practice of hemerology: by correlating the outcome of human activities with the significance of certain dates, hemerology

5. Marc Kalinowski, *Cosmologie et Divination dans la Chine Ancienne* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991), cited in Harper, "Warring States Natural Philosophy," 860.

6. *Shang shu* 12, 5b. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics. Vol. 3: The Shoo King, or Book of Historical Documents* (London: Henry Frowde, 1865; 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1893–4; rpt. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1960), cited in Harper, "Warring States Natural Philosophy," 863.

7. It was not, then, a coincidence that this was also the period in which vessel theory (*mai* 脈) emerged in medical accounts of the body. It is in fourth-century BCE texts that we find the first instances of the idea that there exist in the body a network of blood vessels that carry *qi* and blood throughout the body, and that these constitute a circulating system. It is also in a text from this period, the *Guanzi* 管子, that we find an analogy between the system of muscles and vessels in the human body and channels of water that flow through the earth, which are the earth's "blood and *qi*." Both the body and the earth are intelligible systems characterized by circulating matter and energy. See *Guanzi* 14, "Shuidi," *Sibu beiyao*, ed., trans. Rickett, discussed and cited in Harper, "Warring States Natural Philosophy," 876.

represented a means of deploying a certain kind of understanding of how the world worked so as to control one's destiny. Second, and more fundamentally, since human beings were also part of this world, the idea that the constituent elements that made up reality possessed a characteristic force and direction implied also that human beings were made up of constituent elements that possessed a characteristic force and direction. In both the natural world and the human body, substance was joined with a potentiality that determined the optimal course of development.

Warring States developments in thinking about the natural world provide us, then, with a key to better understanding the nature of the ethical argument that Mencius and other philosophers were making. Natural philosophy was not just a collection of technical disciplines but also a form of inquiry that was geared toward understanding how the world worked in a more general sense. When Mencius invoked examples of natural phenomena to support his claims about the inborn human nature (*xing* 性), it was not to illustrate or provide a "mere" analogy for his moral claims. Rather, these examples exhibited the ontological foundations of his ethics, and supported his view that human nature possessed a potentiality that had to be actualized. Mencius's theory of human nature could thus be mapped onto the new, dynamic picture of the Five Agents: just as the *wuxing* involved both material substance and intelligible, patterned tendencies, so did the inborn nature encompass both substance and directionality. And like water descending and fire rising up, the nature of human beings was caught up in a trajectory of change and movement defined by a potentiality defined by what it was. It was thus an essential part of the ethical task of human beings to understand the tendencies of their nature so as to bring it toward fulfillment.

THE ETHICS OF FULFILLMENT

Mencius's assertion that human nature was "good" was based on the assumption that all human beings possessed certain innate dispositions that tended toward fulfillment—an assumption that, as we have seen, was fully consistent with certain emergent ideas about the workings of the physical world. This conception of the innate nature of human beings translated into a number of specific claims about human moral inclinations. The most important of these was the idea that every human being possessed "a mind that feels pity and compassion." This mind would be triggered, for instance, by the sight of a child who was about to fall into a well. Not all people would necessarily act upon their feeling, but everyone—at least everyone whose capacities were working normally—felt it, even if it was just a matter of the faintest twinge of regret. The fact that they did feel it was sufficient, according to Mencius, for making the case that "no one is devoid of a mind sensitive to the sufferings of others." In addition to such feelings of "pity

and compassion,” there were three other inclinations that Mencius regarded as innately human: “shame and aversion,” “courtesy and respect,” and “a sense of right and wrong.” Together, these “four sprouts” (*si duan* 四端) represented the origins of moral awareness and the starting point of virtue:

The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness; the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness; the mind’s feeling of courtesy and modesty is the sprout of ritual propriety; and the mind’s sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom. Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have four limbs. For one to have these four sprouts and yet to say of oneself that one is unable to fulfill them is to cripple oneself. [2A56]⁸

The use of botanical imagery here was more than metaphorical: it reflected Mencius’s assumption that the basic virtues of humanness, rightness, propriety, and wisdom were the expression and proper fulfillment of natural, normally functioning human inclinations. To be fully human was to fulfill this potentiality, which was why failing to do so amounted to a form of “crippling.” Our potentiality to be fully moral was biologically inscribed and, like the limbs of our body, could be understood according to a criterion of normal functioning and optimal realization. This fulfillment was the very standard of goodness: as Mencius conceived it, goodness was the proper fulfillment of a certain set of spontaneous impulses and feelings that were innate, natural, and therefore normative; it was not something superimposed upon our natural tendencies as human beings.

The naturalistic foundations of Mencius’s conception of human nature can be seen in the parable of Ox Mountain [6A8]. Here, he compares the human mind with a mountain that was once covered with lush vegetation but that has been devastated by the axes of woodcutters and overgrazing by cattle and goats. The natural restorative forces being inadequate to counteract the destruction, the mountain has become barren and gives the impression that nothing could ever grow there. But this barrenness, Mencius explains, does not represent the inherent condition of the mountain. Similarly, people’s originally good mind (*liang xin* 良心) can become so ravaged that it loses all trace of goodness, rendering them incapable of anything but vicious, malevolent actions. This does not mean, however, that “badness” is the underlying reality or disposition of human beings (*ren zhi qing* 人之情). Accordingly, what we must do is nurture the “good mind” that

8. Translations of passages from the *Mencius*, with some modifications, are mainly from *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom and ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Other translations consulted include that of D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); and as appears in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Translated passages with no translator given are my own. Passage citations follow the format of *A Concordance to the Mengzi* (*Mengzi zhou zi suo yin* 孟子逐字索引), ed. D. C. Lau, Ho Che Wah, and Chen Fong Ching, *ICS Series* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1995), hereafter cited as *ICS Mengzi*. This passage is from *ICS Mengzi* 3.6/18/8–10. “Crippling” is Lau’s rendering of *zei* 賊.

we are originally endowed with. This ultimately lays out the proper moral task of human beings: just as one might protect the trees and plants on Ox Mountain so that their natural tendency to grow and flourish can be realized, so must one protect one's original mind and allow it to flourish, thereby fully realizing its potential.⁹

Prior to assuming significance as a focal point of ethical debates, the term for the inborn nature, *xing*, referred to "nature" in a more strictly biological sense and was closely connected with the word *sheng* 生, meaning "life," "generation," or "growth." As A. C. Graham has observed, to speak of the *xing* of something was to speak of the "proper course of development during its process of *sheng*." In the case of human beings, it referred to "living to a ripe old age in good health, but also . . . [to] every other characteristic proper to man's formation, growth and decay."¹⁰ *Xing* was a topic of theoretical discussion among the followers of Yang Zhu 楊朱 (c. 350 BCE), who promoted the idea of *yang sheng* 養生, or "nurturing life." This was primarily about maintaining one's physical health, living out the full span of one's life, and enjoying the pleasures of the body.¹¹ Optimizing personal health and pleasure required caution with respect to one's relationship to things in the world so as to avoid personal harm, and thus called for emotional restraint and control over one's desires. The Yangist concern with preserving one's "nature" in the midst of the potentially dangerous world of the senses can be seen in chapter 21 of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (c. 240 BCE), which states: "[T]he sage, in dealing with music, the beauty of women, and appetizing tastes, when they are beneficial to his nature chooses them, when they are harmful to his nature, rejects them; this is the way to keep one's nature intact."¹²

Although Mencius attacked the Yangists for what he regarded as their fundamentally selfish orientation—their principles implying a turning of one's back to the world and relinquishing any sense of obligation to others—his approach and interests resembled theirs in a number of ways.¹³ Mencius was concerned with the proper flourishing of one's *xing*, which he regarded as a biological given that encompassed basic human emotions and desires. He also assumed that the yearnings and inclinations of the physical body—the longing for food,

9. *ICS Mengzi* 11.8/59/10–17.

10. Graham, "Meaning of *Ch'ing*," 10.

11. On the Yangists, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 53–64.

12. This is one of five chapters of this text that can be traced back to the Yangist school. *Lu shi chun qiu*, Xu, 1/8A/3–7, cited and translated in Graham, "The Meaning of *Ch'ing*," 10. On the bodily dimensions of early Chinese ethics, see Mark Csikszentmihaly, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill 2004); and Lewis, *Construction of Space*, ch. 1.

13. John Emerson has argued that "Yang's key innovation was the 'discovery of the body.'" I depart from this view in proposing that a more naturalistic concern—and thus a concern with the physical body—is part of a shared orientation of Warring States thinkers in general. The issue, then, is not about whether the body should be a focus of concern, but of whether there was more to a person than the body. See John Emerson, "Yang Chu's Discovery of the Body," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 4 (1996): 533–566.

drink, and sex; the delights of the eyes and ears; the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment—were not fundamentally incompatible with the virtuous life, or with a harmonious and just political order. On the contrary, virtue and a sound, well-governed society necessarily involved pleasure and enjoyment. Indeed, a striking feature of Mencius's discussions of right forms of conduct, be it in one's personal cultivation or in the task of rulership, is the emphasis on *le* 樂 or *yue* 悅—delight, pleasure, or happiness. In responding to the question of King Xuan of Qi as to whether he should annex the state of Yan, Mencius replies: "If annexing it would please the people of Yan, then annex it. . . . If annexing it would not please the people of Yan, then do not annex it" [1B10].¹⁴ That Mencius invokes the happiness and delight of the people as a criterion for deciding the proper course of action for the ruler is significant: it points to Mencius's conviction that the biological criterion of fulfillment extends to questions of how we should live and act.

For Mencius, then, fulfilling oneself as a human being involved the deployment of one's capacities in such a way that one could optimally fulfill one's potential as both a physical and a moral being. This required higher forms of understanding about one's own nature and about the nature of reality. Mencius emphasizes that the task of attending to one's mind (*xin* 心) and nature (*xing* 性) is the particular human way of according with Heaven (*tian* 天), which we may reasonably take as representing the laws and forces that govern the natural world:

To fully realize (*jin* 盡) one's mind is to understand (*zhi* 知) one's nature. To understand one's nature is to understand Heaven. Preserving (*zun* 存) one's mind and nourishing (*yang* 養) one's nature is how we serve (*shi* 事) Heaven. Not being conflicted over the length of one's life, but cultivating oneself in anticipation of what might come, is how we stand before fate (*ming* 命). [7A1]¹⁵

In this passage, Mencius states that the human way to "serve" Heaven is to "preserve our mind" and "nourish our nature," indicating that it is in the task of self-cultivation and of realizing our potentiality for goodness that we are, in the broader scheme of things, doing what is natural and proper for us as human beings, given our distinct endowments and capacities.

Mencius's concept of *xin* needs to be considered within this context. Translated variously as "heart," "mind," "heart/mind," and "heart-and-mind," *xin* generally refers to the locus, or faculty, of emotions, cognition, evaluation, and judgment

14. *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2008), 27. On the importance of *le* (pleasure) as an ethical and political consideration in early Chinese thought, see Michael Nylan, "The Politics of Pleasure," *Asia Major* 14, no. 1 (2001): 73–124.

15. *ICS Mengzi* 13.1/67/15–16.

within the self.¹⁶ All these functions are part of the repertoire of activities envisioned by Mencius's conception of *xin*. We have seen that the *xin* is the site of the "sprouts" of morally inclined feelings that all human beings presumably possessed. But these four sprouts include not only such feelings as "pity and compassion," and "shame and aversion," but also "courtesy and modesty" and "a sense of right and wrong," which are clearly not simply "emotive" in a narrow sense but also involve a more complex range of perceptions, evaluations, and judgments. An even more strongly cognitive sense appears in Mencius's assertion that, among all the senses of the body, the mind possesses the unique capacity to think and reflect (*si* 思):

The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me. [6A15]¹⁷

It is the mind's ability to think that enables it to rise above the push and pull of physical desires to pursue order (*li* 理) and rightness (*yi* 義).

Of further significance is Mencius's reference to "fate," or *ming* 命. Although the term "fate" in English suggests a submission to some external, supernatural force, as a naturistic concept it assumes a different sense in this context, pointing to human participation in a shared cosmic process. In this case, it is the participation of the workings of one's physical constitution and moral inclinations:

The mouth in relation to flavors, the eyes in relation to sights, the ears in relation to notes, the nose in relation to odors, the four limbs in relation to comfort—these are matters of human nature, but they are also fated (*ming* 命). Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as "human nature." Benevolence between father and son, rightness between ruler and minister, ritual propriety between guest and host, wisdom in relation to the worthy, the sage in relation to the Way of Heaven—these are fated, but they also involve human nature. Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as 'fated.'" [7B24]¹⁸

In linking the physical workings of one's inborn nature to "fate," Mencius makes explicit that our innate endowments are part of a larger mechanism of patterns and processes that are operative in the world.¹⁹ The patterns that

16. For an overview of *xin* and its range of meanings and uses in early Chinese thought, see Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 184–185.

17. *ICS Mengzi* 11.15/60/27–11.15/61/1.

18. *Mengzi*, trans. Van Norden, 189.

19. See Lisa Raphals's discussion of the wide-ranging meanings of *ming* and her insightful critique of modern conventions of approaching concepts of fate and destiny, in "Fate, Fortune, Chance, and Luck in Chinese and Greek: A Comparative Semantic History," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4 (2003): 537–574.

govern our physical condition also have normative implications, and understanding them is what enables us to actualize our innate potentialities and pursue an optimal trajectory of life. The ethical project and the project of fulfilling the potentialities of our physical nature are not merely analogous, but, in fact, intertwined with one another: both our bodies (*xing* 形) and sense faculties (*se* 色), on the one hand, and our potentiality for virtue, on the other, constitute our Heaven-endowed nature (*tian xing* 天性). And ultimately, it is only those who fully realize their inborn nature in the ethical sense—in other words, sages (*sheng* 聖)—who are able to “fulfill their physical form (*jian xing* 踐形)” [7A38].

DEBATING NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE

The idea that there were certain intelligible forces at work in the cosmos was pervasive among the Warring States thinkers, and gave a distinct shape to investigations of how to live properly and bring order to the world. What is more specific to Mencius was his endeavor to root morality in certain constitutional features of human beings. But even here, it is worthwhile to identify an important distinction. First, there is the fact, emphasized by Irene Bloom, that while Mencius was in basic agreement with some of his contemporary thinkers, who held that human beings were characterized by certain shared physiological and emotional inclinations, he took the further step of arguing that these inclinations amounted to *more* than the desire for bodily satisfaction and pleasure.²⁰ To fulfill one's potential as a human being also called for the realization of one's moral and intellectual potentiality, and such fulfillment gave a distinct structure and intelligibility to human life.

However, Mencius was not just proposing to tag on, as it were, a moral dimension to a naturalistic conception of human nature. He seems to have been engaged in a more general dispute over whether human beings were part of a larger order governed by mechanized processes, or whether they themselves possessed certain inherent and patterned tendencies. In both cases we are dealing with naturalistic accounts of how the world—and human beings within this world—operate, but with vastly different implications. The first model conceives of human beings as being constituted in such a way that they simply respond to external stimuli and adapt themselves accordingly, in which case the possibility of morality would depend on creating the right kinds of stimuli—that is, constructing a proper environment with the right kinds of institutions and models to follow. The second assumes that human beings are sites of coherence unto themselves, to the extent that, in the workings of their dispositions and

20. Irene Bloom, “Biology and Culture in the Mencian View of Human Nature,” in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. Alan Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 93.

their movement toward the fulfillment, they embodied the patterns of the world around them.

We have, in effect, two different kinds of naturalistic accounts, sustaining two distinct ethical positions. The debates over human nature in the fourth century BCE were thus not only about whether nature could be infused with moral significance but also about what the natural world was like and how human reality linked up with this world. If human nature was part of a larger order that acted upon it and determined its shape, what we could call morality would be a matter of furnishing patterns, guidelines, and models of behavior for this nature to conform to. On the other hand, if it possessed certain intrinsic and characteristic properties, then the sources of moral direction could be traced back to forces that were innate in human beings themselves. This was essentially the dispute between Mencius and Gaozi 告子 (c. 420–350 BCE), which was carried out in a series of exchanges in *Mencius* 6A1–4.

Not much is known about Gaozi except what we read of his views in the *Mencius*, but he is usually taken as representative of a strand of the Confucian school. Gaozi's basic position is that *xing* is morally neutral, and therefore fully malleable through external forces. To make his case, he deploys a series of analogies, comparing human *xing* to a willow tree and to flowing water to emphasize its essential malleability. In the latter, he points out that, just as water has no preference for direction, but simply goes where there is space to flow, so it is that human nature lacks any particular tendency or affinities:

Human nature is like swirling water. Open a passage for it in the east, and it will flow east; open a passage for it in the west, and it will flow west. Human nature does not distinguish between good and not-good any more than water distinguishes between east and west.[6A2]²¹

Gaozi's water analogy does not only deny that human beings have moral inclinations but also that it has any particular inclinations whatsoever. As we have seen earlier, the account of water given in the *Shang Shu* specifies that the character of water is to "wet" (*run* 潤) and "descend" (*xia* 下). Gaozi regards water as inert matter that simply adapts to its circumstances and goes wherever one directs it. Mencius's refutation begins by establishing that water is not simply matter, but possesses certain tendencies that are particular to its nature. That is, it flows downward rather than right or left:

It is true that water does not distinguish between east and west, but does it fail to distinguish between up and down? The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency

21. *ICS Mengzi*, 11.2/56/21–22.

to flow downward. Now, by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is momentum (*shi* 勢) that makes this happen. When people can be made to do what is not good (可使為不善), what happens to their nature is like this.[6A2]²²

Having asserted that water necessarily tends downward, Mencius argues that the same holds for human nature: it possesses certain inherent tendencies, among which is the tendency toward goodness. And just as one properly directs water in accordance with its natural inclinations, so should we properly direct human nature in accordance with its natural inclinations.

The view that human nature was morally neutral was hardly unique to Gaozi. Other texts surviving from this period, such as the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 (Human Nature emerges from the Decree), one of the excavated texts from Guodian tombs, similarly put forward the view that the inborn nature did not possess a coherent moral direction, but depended, instead, upon “things” to move and direct it. In this text, *qing* 情—referring here to feelings and desires that are triggered by our encounter with “things” (*wu* 物) and events in the world—is explained as “arising in the inborn nature” (*qing xing yu sheng* 情生於性).²³ The text does not attribute any inherent pattern or directionality to this inborn nature. Rather, the most striking feature of this nature is its passivity: it is pushed, moved, and incited by things outside of itself. It is not a subject, but is subject to things. This quality of human nature is perhaps most evident in the following passage:

Generally speaking, regarding the nature, some things move it, some things entice it, some things interact with it, some things discipline it, some things bring it forth, and some things nurture it, some things make it grow. Generally speaking, what moves the nature are things; what delights the mind is pleasure; what joins with the nature are intentions; what disciplines the nature is propriety; what brings the nature forth is circumstance; what nurtures the nature is practice; what makes the nature grow is the Dao.²⁴

The practical implication of this passive conception of human nature is that what human beings need are right forms of culture to steer (*dao* 道) people along in the proper course of life—specifically, poetry, documents, ritual, and music.

22. *ICS Mengzi* 11.2/56/25. *Mengzi*, trans. Bloom, 121.

23. *Xing zi ming chu*, strip 16-18, *Guodian Chumu Zhujian* (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998), 179. The following is based on my discussion of this text in a survey essay on early accounts of emotions, in Curie Virág, “Early Confucian Perspectives on Emotions,” in *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy*, ed. Vincent Shen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 203–226. See also Puett, “Ethics of Responding Properly.”

24. *Xing zi ming chu*, strip 16-18, *Guodian Chumu Zhujian*, 179.

It is these texts and cultural forms that should be used to instruct (*jiao* 教) the people, give pattern and order to their lives, and instill them with virtue (*de* 德).

Returning to Mencius, we see that his conception of *xing* as containing the sprouts of virtue rests, even more generally, on a very particular conception of what things are like—a conception that is consistent with developments in Warring States thought concerning the workings of the natural world. An approach to the human being in terms of dispositions and potentialities appeals to ways of thinking about nature that are not merely metaphorical or analogical in a casual sense. It is part of a larger argument that is being made, in a number of philosophical and scientific domains, about what a substance or body is—the argument being that a constituent element of something, including human nature, is not simply inert matter but something that possesses a directionality and a drive to fulfillment. Possessing such a nature, human beings were subject to certain constraints, which Mencius identified as the workings of fate (*ming*). But these constraints were also the basis upon which normative criteria and practices could be traced back to intrinsic features of human beings, rather than to external sources of authority. This had important consequences for emotions, which now played a crucial role in locating moral agency within the human self.

THE CONSTRAINTS OF BEING HUMAN: SATISFYING THE HEART AND THE PRACTICE OF BURIAL

Mencius's view that being human entailed certain characteristic inclinations, and that these inclinations possessed a drive toward fulfillment, implies a particular way of thinking about emotions. We have already seen in Mencius's "sprouts" theory that certain basic emotive dispositions were the sources of moral virtues such as humaneness and rightness. Mencius's conception of *qing* 情 was in line with such ideas. *Qing* is mentioned only four times in the *Mencius*, and in these instances it refers not to "feelings" or "emotions" as such, as it does in many other Warring States texts, but rather to the characteristic dispositions of things. This is in dramatic contrast to the account given in the *Xing zi ming chu*, where *qing* represents something akin to the modern, materialist conception of emotions as movements triggered by our encounter with things and events in the world. In Mencius's conception, the *qing* of human beings is such that "it can be used for the good" (*ke yi wei shan* 可以為善) [6A6].²⁵ In the case of "things" (*wu* 物) in particular, it is on account of their *qing* that they are unequal (*bu qi* 不齊)—an idea that allows Mencius to justify the existence of hierarchy and differentiation in society.²⁶

25. ICS Mengzi 11.6/58/20.

26. ICS Mengzi 5.4/30/3.

It has become quite clear by now that *qing* was subject to a variety of interpretations during the Warring States period. A. C. Graham's early conjecture that there was an evolution in the meaning of *qing* from the Mencian conception of it as the essential, characteristic nature of things to the full-fledged emotive conception in the Han period, has long been challenged.²⁷ As Michael Puett and Christoph Harbsmeier have amply demonstrated, *qing* already possessed a broad semantic range in the Warring States period. We do not have, then, a single, linear course of development from the Warring States to the Han, but an ongoing situation of contention and debate in which thinkers put forth an array of competing views corresponding to diverse ethical and political agendas.²⁸ Building on this observation, Mencius's argument that *qing* refers to an underlying, characteristic disposition of something—and that, for human beings, this disposition is to become good—represented an approach to *qing* that pointed toward the inevitability of certain emotions and the normativity of their proper satisfaction and realization.

This is vividly illustrated in Mencius's defense of ritual traditions surrounding the burial of the dead in passages 2B7 and 3A5. These passages reveal Mencius's conviction that certain emotions possessed a coherence and drive toward fulfillment that could lead to unambiguous conclusions about the right form of conduct. Here, Mencius brings up the importance of such human feelings as experiencing comfort (*jiao* 校) and "giving full expression to one's heart" (*jin yu ren xin* 盡於人心), as well as of those feelings on the opposite side of the emotional spectrum: a failure to achieve satisfaction (*bu ke yi wei yue* 不可以為悅), the experience of horror, and an inability to bear (*bu ren* 不忍) the sight or sound of something. Invoked by Mencius to justify his claim that the sources of moral behavior are innate, these instances of unavoidable human emotions support the idea that ritual practices have their origins in certain basic emotional inclinations of human beings. They can explain why these rituals are necessary rather than historically contingent practices.

We have seen in the discussion of the *Analects*, chapter 1, that emotions played a central role in validating ritual propriety. However, Confucius was interested in a different aspect of the problem: that of authenticating ritual by establishing the unity of inner and outer. He thus stressed that ritual forms needed to be accompanied by genuine feelings, and that feelings ought to be manifested in ritually correct action. Rituals were expressions of human feelings that would otherwise be impalpable. With Mencius, there is a basic shift in focus; rituals interest Mencius not because they authenticate and make known the person, but because they function to satisfy basic emotional needs. The critical difference between the two perspectives is the insertion, in the Mencian account, of a category of the

27. Graham, "Meaning of *Ch'ing*."

28. Puett, "Ethics of Responding Properly"; Harbsmeier, "Semantics of *Qing*."

human being as an organism with particular, characteristic workings, and possessing certain physical, psychological, and emotional proclivities.

The role that ritual plays in satisfying basic human emotional needs can be seen in passage 2B7, in which Mencius explains how the ritual of burying the dead came to be practiced. Mencius does not, as one might expect, explain proper burial practice as an expression of the grief or sorrow that accompanied the loss of one's loved ones. Nor is he concerned with the importance of ritually enacting one's feelings of affection and gratitude, as was the case with Confucius. Instead, he focuses on how people felt when they succeeded in providing proper burials for them (satisfaction or comfort) or when they failed to do so (horror). In other words, Mencius is primarily interested in the therapeutic effect of this ritual practice for the living—that is, how it helps to satisfy certain needs and yearnings that arise upon the loss of a loved one.

This emphasis emerges in Mencius's rejoinder to the Mohists's criticism of what they regarded as the extravagant burial practices of the Confucians. Here, Mencius defends his own decision to have his mother buried in a coffin made of high-quality wood:

In high antiquity, there were no proper measurements (*wu du* 無度) for the inner and outer coffin. In middle antiquity, both the inner and the outer coffins were supposed to be seven inches thick, and this was true for everyone from the Son of Heaven to the common people. This was not simply for the sake of a beautiful appearance but because it allowed, in the end, for the full expression of people's hearts (*jin yu ren xin* 盡於人心). If people were not permitted to do this, it would be inadequate to secure satisfaction (*bu ke yi wei yue* 不可以為悅), and if they did not have the means to do it, it would also be inadequate to secure satisfaction. The ancients, if they were able to do this, and had the means to do it, all employed this practice. Why should I alone not have done so? Moreover, does it not bring comfort (*jiao* 慼) to the heart/mind to keep the earth from touching the bodies of those we love who have been transformed in death? I have heard that the noble person would not for anything in the world economize when it came to his parents.²⁹

What is significant here is that Mencius defends a practice that has been upheld by Confucians for generations, but in terms that are quite foreign to the language used by Confucius. To justify his decision to have his mother's coffin made from fine wood, Mencius explains that it gave "satisfaction" (*yue* 悅) and "comfort" (*jiao* 慼) to his heart. Mencius's reference to "proper measurement" (*du* 度) here is also significant, in light of the way he develops his argument. It

29. *ICS Mengzi*, 4.7/22/1–4. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 43.

indicates that there is an objective standard for deciding on the correct dimensions of the coffin, and that this involves their capacity to bring about the full satisfaction of people's hearts by allowing them to properly show their love and respect to their deceased parents. This is why the innovations of "middle antiquity" were such an improvement over the lax situation in "high antiquity," when there were no rules and standards governing burial practices.

In passage 3A5, Mencius makes an even more forceful case for why, given our basic emotional makeup, proper burial is necessary. Here, he argues by way of a counterexample, explaining what happened to those in high antiquity who did not bury their deceased parents but simply left their bodies to lie exposed in a ditch:

Now, in high antiquity there were some who did not bury their parents. When their parents died, they picked them up and cast them into a ditch. Another day, when they passed by, they saw that they were being devoured by foxes and wildcats and bitten by flies and gnats. Sweat broke out on their foreheads, and they averted their eyes to avoid the sight. *The sweat was not because of what others would think but was an expression in their faces and eyes of what was present in their hearts (zhong xin 中心).* They returned home and brought earth-carrying baskets and spades to cover them over. Burying them was truly right (*cheng shi* 誠是), and filial children and benevolent people also act properly (*bi you dao* 必有道) when they bury their parents.³⁰

What drove these negligent offspring to return and give their parents a proper burial was a certain irrepressible emotion. Although it goes unnamed, Mencius describes its physiological symptoms: breaking out into a sweat, turning away one's body, averting one's eyes. And the situation described—the sight of the decomposing bodies of one's parents being eaten by animals—makes quite clear that what we are confronted with is something like "horror."³¹ Mencius insists that it is this horror emanating from within the heart—and not extrinsic, calculating considerations such as what other people might think or do—that compelled these people to act: "What was inside their hearts broke through to their countenances."

Why does Mencius approach the ritual of burial by pointing to the feeling of horror rather than the most obvious candidate, grief or sorrow, which had been so important for Confucius? Answering this question is admittedly a speculative

30. *ICS Mengzi*, 5.5/30/19–25. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 60; my italics.

31. Stumbling across dead bodies is an often-cited example to convey what horror is and how it differs from related feelings such as terror or fear. Devendra Varma writes, for example: "The difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse." Devendra Varma, *The Gothic Flame: Being a History of the Gothic Novel in England* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1957), 16.

exercise, but there does seem to exist a firm link between the feeling of horror and the logical structure of Mencius's ethics. For Confucius, who was concerned with retrieving ritual from becoming purely formalistic, emotions lent authenticity to outward gestures that would otherwise be "mere" gesture. Mencius's interest in emotions reflected a different priority: understanding what were the innate, characteristic inclinations of human beings and interrogating, upon their basis, where moral norms and practices come from. He arrives at this by posing the question: Are there certain things that people, as human beings, simply cannot bear to do? By dramatizing the sheer horror resulting from *not* burying their parents properly, Mencius conveys the power and inevitability of the emotive "sprouts" of goodness—in this case, the feeling of reverence and respect. When these spontaneous and natural emotions are violated and prevented from realizing themselves, the situation is unbearable. Mencius concludes from this that the ritual of burial is the natural and proper human course of action.

Unlike grief, horror comes with an injunction for a clear and necessary response of avoidance or resolution. Moreover, as Robert C. Roberts has noted, what makes horror different from related emotions, such as fear or dread, is the special kind of aversion to an object stemming from the standard of normalcy. Giving the example of dead fetuses in a wastebasket of an abortion clinic, Roberts notes that the feeling of horror arises in the context of "a natural valuation of babies in their normal state." This response drives a person to act in one of two ways:

Horror's consequent concern is a desire to escape from the horrific thing or a desire that it be restored to a state of normalcy. Horror's defining proposition, then, is something like this: X is strongly aversive because it is grotesquely abnormal; may I escape from X or may X be restored to normalcy.³²

For Mencius, too, there is a standard of normalcy that is violated in the failure to bury one's parents, based on the fact that one has known them in life and in their proper living state. The sight of one's unburied parents thus impels action, but the possibility of fleeing the scene is not entertained at all. Instead, he emphasizes that this is a situation that people are not willing to endure, which makes it imperative to resolve it by properly burying the bodies.³³ In contrast to grief, which one may assuage but often never completely leave behind, horror is resolvable in some way and therefore provokes action. Moreover, whereas grief is largely self-referential, horror implies a responsibility—in this case, toward one's parents—that calls for rectifying the situation. In resolving the problem through

32. Robert Campbell Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201–202.

33. *ICS Mengzi* 1.1/1/5–9. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 1.

burial, one honors one's parents and does something good for the world, in addition to assuaging one's own emotional distress. Ultimately, through the case of human burial, Mencius seeks to establish that the moral norms that should guide our lives are the proper extension of emotions and inclinations that are natural and spontaneous. That people cannot endure the sight of their unburied parents reveals that there are certain basic limits to what our emotional constitution can bear, and that these limits furnish the basis of our morality insofar as they represent what is intrinsic and unavoidable in ourselves.

THE SCIENCE OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF PLEASURE

Two basic ideas in Mencius's ethical theory that we have considered—namely, that people are naturally disposed to virtue through certain basic human inclinations, and that virtue and right action are rewarded by a sense of joy and satisfaction—are potentially in uneasy tension with one another. The basic problem is that their coexistence would conflate motivations of self-interest and virtue, which are often considered to be distinct. This tension arises in Mencius's political ideas, and how we understand the relationship between the two has important bearing on how to think about Mencius's ethics, and about the role of emotions within it. In the very opening passage of the *Mencius*, we find King Hui 惠 of Liang 梁 greeting Mencius by asking what advice he has to give to bring profit (li 利) his state. Mencius responds by reproaching the king for his concern with profit rather than with virtue:

Why must Your Majesty speak of profit? I have only [teachings concerning] humaneness and rightness. If the king says, "How can I profit my state?" the officers will say, "How can I profit my house?" and the gentlemen and the common people will say, "How can I profit myself?" Those above and those below will compete with one another for profit, and the state will be imperiled. One who murders the ruler over a state of a ten thousand chariots surely will be from a house of a thousand chariots; one who murders the ruler over a state of a thousand chariots surely will be from a house of a hundred chariots. A share of a thousand in ten thousand or a hundred in a thousand is hardly negligible; yet, when what is right is subordinated to what is profitable, the urge to lay claim to more becomes irresistible. It has never happened that one given to humaneness abandons his parents, nor that one given to what is right subordinates the interests of his lord. Let the king speak only of humaneness and rightness. What need has he to speak of profit? [1A1]³⁴

34. Herrlee Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao-Tse-tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 87, cited in Bryan W. Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency," in *Virtue, Nature, and Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline and P. J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 110.

Mencius's diatribe against *li* 利 is clearly an attack on the Mohist emphasis on *li* as the criterion of right conduct. But this is not simply an argument against political calculation in favor of morality. Mencius's defense of humaneness and rightness takes place within a strikingly practical consideration of what is politically sound, and the rhetoric resembles what we have seen in Mozi. The problem with profit-seeking, Mencius explains, is that it gives rise to competitive behavior that leads to political failure and chaos. In contrast to this, humaneness and rightness are conducive to political order and stability, which are, in effect, the basic achievements of "rightness" as conceived by the Mohists. When Mencius asks, "Why must your Majesty speak of profit?" he is not simply assuming the moral high ground and dismissing considerations of practical consequences. Instead, he is arguing that one who understands how politics truly works will not pursue "profit" in a narrow sense. A ruler who practices humaneness and rightness will be politically efficacious *and* will enjoy the approval and compliance his subjects.

Mencius assumes that, in politics as in ethics, the optimal course of action depends on achieving a higher understanding of how things work. As in the case of Mozi, the scholarship surrounding Mencius's political ideas has tended to be divided between those who regard Mencius as a promoter of self-interest and those who see him as excluding selfish motivations. These considerations have been understood as mutually exclusive. Herrlee Creel, for instance, has stressed the "utilitarian" aspect of Mencius's thought, concluding that Mencius was in fact advocating a "doctrine of enlightened selfishness."³⁵ Against this thesis, Bryan Van Norden points out, based on his reading of the thought experiment about the child about to fall into a well, that Mencius "specifically rules out selfish motivations" because the feeling of compassion arises independently from any consideration of personal gain. He argues that essential to Mencius's moral theory is a distinction between such selfish motivations and "genuine virtues," which he associates with "having the appropriate (*non-selfish*) motivation."³⁶

I propose that, in arguing that virtue is politically efficacious, Mencius in fact unsettles the distinction between doing what is right and doing what is politically expedient. He does not pit reason and strategy against virtue, but he sees them as effectively united when one pursues the optimal course of action. This is not to claim that there is no conceptual distinction to be made between motivations of self-interest and of virtue; in actual situations, the two often can be separated, and we are confronted with alternative courses of action that might be legitimately

35. Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi," 110; my italics.

36. In passage 2A6, Mencius gives the example of five specific policies, pertaining to sound employment and taxation practices, that when put into effect will cause the people to "welcome you like a father or mother." Rulers who deploy sound policies are sure to win the affections of the people and not have any enemies in the world: "One who has no enemies in the world is the agent of Heaven. It has never happened that someone is like this yet fails to become King." On the other hand, if one goes against the natural inclinations of the people—leading children to attack their parents, for example—one is guaranteed failure. Such a campaign, Mencius insists, has "never succeeded since the birth of human beings."

seen in such terms. The point, rather, is that a strict bifurcation rather distorts the picture and exaggerates—indeed, fixates on—the conflict between self-interest and “moral” criteria. As was the case in Mencius’s ethics, so it is in his political theory: insight into the workings of reality, and of human nature as part of this reality, is necessary for mastering the science of politics.

It is in this context that Mencius’s emphasis on achieving psychological insight achieves practical significance. According to Mencius, the political goal of conquering neighboring territories and pacifying their populace depends on winning over the people—that is, on conquering their hearts. A ruler who wishes to achieve success in this endeavor must thus understand what it is that people want and know how to satisfy their wishes. This is the Mencian twist on the “Mandate of Heaven.” It takes the affections of the people as an indicator of whether or not a king is fit to rule: if he can win their affections, they will follow him; if not, they will reject him. When King Xuan of Qi consults with Mencius about whether, having conquered the state of Yan 燕, he should proceed to annex it, the latter replies:

If annexing it will cause the people of Yan to be pleased/satisfied (*yue* 悅), then annex it. Among the ancients there was one who did this: King Wu. If annexing it will cause the people of Yan to be displeased, then do not take it. Among the men of antiquity there was one who did this: King Wen. If a state of ten thousand chariots attacks another state of ten thousand chariots, and the people come with baskets of food and pitchers of drink to welcome the king’s army, can it be for any other reason than to avoid flood and fire? If the water then gets deeper and the fire hotter, they will surely turn again. [IB10]³⁷

Mencius assumes here, following Confucius, that people’s true feelings are genuinely and outwardly expressed, and that the people of Yan will make manifest their feelings about the king of Qi by either welcoming him with food or fleeing him. Ultimately, the difference between a mere hegemon (*ba* 霸) and a true king (*wang* 王) is whether one is able to win the hearts of the people: whereas a hegemon, relying on sheer force (*li* 力), causes the people to submit outwardly but fails to win them over “in their hearts,” a king relies on his efficacious virtue (*de* 德), which ensures that the people are “pleased to the depths of their hearts (*zhong xin yue* 中心悅) and genuinely submit,” like the seventy disciples who followed Confucius [2A3].³⁸

Political success, then, depends on understanding human beings and their motivations—what makes them tick, in effect—and then acting in accordance with this understanding. In passage 1A6, Mencius explains to King Xiang of

37. ICS Mengzi 2.10/11/26. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 22–23.

38. ICS Mengzi 3.3/17/16–19. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 33.

Liang the importance of psychological insight for successful rulership by comparing the natural responsiveness of human beings with the inexorable process of sprouts (*miao* 苗) growing in hospitable natural conditions:

Does Your Majesty know the way of sprouts? During the dry period of the summer months, the sprouts shrivel up. But when dense clouds gather in the sky and the rain falls in torrents the plants spring up and are revived. When this happens, who can stop them? Now, among the herders of men in the world there is none who is not fond of killing people. If there is one who was not fond of killing people, the people of the empire would crane their necks to look for him. If this were truly to happen, the people would turn to him like water flowing downward, torrentially—who could stop them?³⁹

A ruler who governs on the basis of what people are naturally like is not just being virtuous; he is also being perceptive, intelligent, and strategic. This is what it means to be virtuous, or *de*. Such a ruler is ensured success, for just as it is the force of nature for sprouts to shrivel in the heat of the summer and flourish in wet conditions, it is the force of nature for people to turn away from rulers who do not care for them and toward those who do. Successful rulership thus depends on an understanding of how to achieve acceptance among the people, and this requires a realistic understanding of *qing*—of what human beings, fundamentally and characteristically, are like.

It also requires understanding the proper methods for achieving one's goals. When Mencius learns from King Xuan that his militaristic policies arise not from a love of war and conflict, but from the fact that “what he desires most of all” (*suo da yu* 所大欲) is to enlarge his domain, he points out that the king has been going about his endeavor in completely the wrong way:

You desire to expand your territory, to bring Qin and Chu into your court, to rule the Central Kingdom, and to pacify the four border tribes. But to pursue such a desire by acting in the way you do is like climbing a tree in search of a fish.⁴⁰

There is, then, a mismatch between the king's goals and his method—between his desires and the means by which he is attempting to satisfy these desires. The proper method depends upon a realistic understanding of people's hearts, which function according to a rather straightforward principle:

It is only a noble person who will be able to have a constant mind despite being without a constant means of livelihood. The people, lacking a

39. *ICS Mengzi* 1.6/3/13–18. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 6.

40. *ICS Mengzi* 1.7/5/27. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 10.

constant means of livelihood, will lack constant minds, and when they lack constant minds there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb. If, once they have sunk into crime, one responds by subjecting them to punishment—this is to entrap the people. With a person of humanity in a position of authority, how could the entrapment of the people be allowed to occur?⁴¹

This being the case, the proper course for the ruler is clear: to provide for the people to ensure a secure livelihood that enables them to take care of their own families. The ruler of a state in which the elderly wear silk and eat meat, and the people do not suffer from hunger or cold, Mencius insists, “has never failed to become a true king.”⁴² Self-interest and doing the right thing, then, pose no real tensions: the satisfaction of the ruler’s desire to expand his domain is optimally achieved through doing what is beneficial to the people. Rulers do not need to sacrifice their own ambitions and desires in order to be virtuous rulers, since the path to political success is to allow the people to care for their own, thereby satisfying *their* basic desires as well.

Where there does exist tension is between the ruler’s more immediate desires and the fulfillment of his long-term political ambitions. This brings us to the matter of the ruler’s delight or pleasure (*le* 樂). In Mencius’s conversations with King Hui, there are two instances in which the king, pointing to the beautiful wildlife, ponds, towers, and landscape around him, asks if men of moral worth (*xianzhe* 賢者) also find pleasure in such things [1A2, 1B4]. The question is telling. It suggests that the ruler is anxious about his own enjoyment of worldly pleasures, and about his failure to experience those loftier pleasures that persons of cultivation and virtue presumably enjoy. The Mohists, as we have seen, objected to Confucian “extravagances” such as music and ritual on the grounds that they had been produced at the cost of great hardship to the laboring masses. Mencius sees no problem with rulers delighting in such sensual pleasures; he does not hold the ruler nor anyone else to a model of asceticism. There is no harm in enjoying the finer things of life, so long as the ruler “shares his pleasures” (*tong le* 同樂) with the people. If he shares them, then even royal extravagances, such as fine food and clothing, refined music, the accumulation of great wealth, and multiple consorts, are perfectly acceptable.⁴³

Mencius stresses, however, that there is an optimal form of delight that is different from mere desire (*yu* 欲):

A gentleman desires a large territory and numerous people. But that is not what he takes delight in. A gentleman takes delight in taking his place in

41. ICS Mengzi 1.7/6/19–21. Mencius, trans. Bloom, 11.

42. ICS Mengzi 1.3/2/5–6. Mencius, trans. Bloom, 12.

43. Cf. ICS Mengzi 1B5.

the middle of the world and making all the people within the Four Seas settled. But that is not what he regards as his nature. It does not add to a gentleman's nature if he puts great things into effect, nor does it subtract from his nature if he lives in poverty. This is because what belongs to him is already settled. A gentleman regards the humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom that are based in his heart as his nature. These are clearly manifest in his life and demeanor. They fill his torso and extend through his four limbs. Though he says nothing, his four limbs express them. [7A21]⁴⁴

As Mencius explains here, the experience of delight is much more than simply a generic pleasure arising from the satisfaction of any kind of desire, such as the desire for a vast dominion or political power: it is the moral achievement of a virtuous person (*junzi* 君子). Genuine delight is only possible when one fulfills those inclinations that pertain to one's nature (*xing* 性). As it turns out, these are none other than the capacity for the four basic human virtues of humane-ness, rightness, propriety, and wisdom. Hence, Mencius's assertion in passage 1A2, directed at King Hui, that it is not that the worthy *also* find delight in the beautiful things of the world, but that it is *only* the worthy who are capable of doing so. Why? Because only the virtuous allow others to enjoy what they enjoy, and are thus able to experience the exquisite delight of shared enjoyment. Those who possess beautiful things but do not share them are incapable of this delight.

For Mencius, then, delight or pleasure is to be understood on a scale of worth based on its ability to be shared by others; on this scale, the enjoyment of one person cannot appropriately be called delight, and is necessarily subordinate to the delight shared with others.⁴⁵ Mencius makes the same point during his conversation with King Xuan about the latter's fondness for music (*yue* 樂). When King Xuan admits to Mencius that he enjoys contemporary music (*shi su zhi yue* 世俗之樂), but not the classical music of the ancients, Mencius responds that what matters is not the king's musical preferences, but whether or not he can share this delight [1B1].⁴⁶ For the ruler to share his delights, however, he must do more than simply allow the people to visit his splendid garden and listen to his court musicians. He must also ensure their livelihood so that they are *able* to enjoy his music. When a king fails to share his delights, it is not that he is necessarily unwilling to share them with the people, but that, having caused them to live in poverty and hardship, he has made it impossible for them to take part in

44. *Mengzi*, trans. Van Norden. Cf. *ICS Mengzi* 7.27/40/14–16.

45. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Mozi appeals to sharability or commonality of experience (*tong* 同) as a criterion of rightness, be it in a course of action or in proper perception. The emphasis on such sharability in both Mencius and Mozi, further exemplifies the emergent sense, in the Warring States period, of the idea of humanity as a universal category marked by certain shared tendencies and faculties. See the discussion of *tong* and its significance in chapter 3, this volume.

46. *ICS Mengzi* 2.1/7/3–32.

his delight. To offer music to people suffering from hunger and cold would be tantamount to “letting them eat cake.”

EMOTION OR REASON? REVISITING THE DEBATE OVER
THE SOURCES OF MORAL MOTIVATION IN MENCIUS

Now we are in a position to assess the scholarly discussion that has been the focus of perhaps the most intense discussion pertaining to the emotions in Mencius's thought—namely, that of the sources of moral direction and whether they are ultimately “emotive” or “cognitive.” The discussion has focused on the famous exchange between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi regarding the sacrificial ox [1A7], which was the point of departure for David Nivison's influential reading in his 1980 essay “Two Roots or One?”⁴⁷ The conversation begins with the king asking Mencius about the virtue (*de* 德) proper to a true ruler. Mencius explains that it all comes down to being able to “care for the people” (*bao min* 保民). When the king asks if he, too, despite all his flaws and weaknesses, could achieve such virtue, Mencius affirms that, indeed he could, and that he knows it on account of the following incident reported by one of the king's courtiers:

While the king was seated in the upper part of the hall, someone led an ox past the hall below [in the courtyard]. On seeing this, the king asked where the ox was going and was told that it was being taken to serve as a blood sacrifice in the consecration of a bell. The king said, “Spare it. I cannot bear (*bu ren* 不忍) its trembling, like an innocent being led to the execution ground.” Asked whether in that case the consecration of the bell should be dispensed with, the king said, “How can it be dispensed with? Substitute a sheep instead.”⁴⁸

Having established that such an incident had indeed taken place, Mencius concludes that the heart of the king is “adequate for being a [true] king.”⁴⁹ Although the king's subjects simply assumed that he was just being stingy—after all, what difference was there between slaughtering an ox or a sheep?—Mencius explains that the key point is not the size or monetary value of an animal, but the fact that the king had actually had direct contact with the ox but not with the sheep, and was therefore moved to act out of compassion. The king's emotions, arising from the fact that he saw the ox and “could not bear” its suffering, truly matter in this case because they confirm that he possesses the compassion necessary for being

47. Nivison, “Two Roots or One?” 133–148. See also David S. Nivison, “Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius,” in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. David Nivison and Bryan Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996); as well as Nivison, “Mencius and Motivation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1980): 417–432.

48. *ICS Mengzi* 1.7/4/3–5. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 7.

49. *ICS Mengzi* 1.7/4/9.

a true king. If the king is able to care for the suffering of an animal, Mencius reasons, surely he is able to care for the people of an entire kingdom.

The moral problem is this: How does one go from having compassion for the ox (which the king feels spontaneously) to having compassion for the people (which he does not)? One thing is clear at the outset: relying on one's spontaneous feelings is not enough. Just as the "four sprouts" must be developed for full-fledged virtue to result, so must the king's compassion for the ox be somehow developed so that he can feel compassion for his people, and therefore be a virtuous ruler who takes care of his people. Mencius makes it sound easy: all he needs to do, he tells the king, is "extend" (*tui* 推) the compassion from the one situation to the other. But what does "extension" mean and how is it to take place?

David Nivison's inauguration of this discussion in terms of one or two "roots" has resulted in scholars assembling themselves around one or the other of two camps, representing what we might call the rationalist versus the emotivist approaches. Nivison stresses that Mencius essentially appeals to King Xuan's sense of logic in pointing out the contradiction between the king's goal of political expansion and his method. He concludes from this that Mencius's account of moral motivation depends on reason and cognition, and not simply on the promptings of the inner nature. In other words, Mencius's use of the term "extension" assumes a "rational" step that is independent of the pull of emotions—hence a two-root theory of motivation, since Mencius elsewhere attributes moral motivation to the spontaneous workings of emotions. A number of other scholars have argued along similar lines. David Wong goes further in the cognitivist direction in maintaining that the moral feelings that Mencius believes are instinctive to all human beings imply rational considerations that do not stem directly from one's desires and emotions. The true reasons to act compassionately must lie "outside the agent"—that is, not in one's own feelings and desires but "directly in the sufferings of others."⁵⁰ While recognizing that, at some level, emotions, moral judgment, and cognition work in a tandem with one another in Mencius's moral thought, Wong intersperses a category of reason that mediates between "raw" and spontaneous emotional responsiveness, on the one hand, and moral judgment, on the other.

On the other side of the divide have been those scholars who have argued that moral motivation in Mencius's account can, in fact, be traced back to emotions. Bryan Van Norden has asserted that, for Mencius, what it all boils down to is that "a human must seek that which he desires most."⁵¹ Similarly, James Behuniak writes that "Mencius subordinates any morality based on doctrines (*yan* 言) that stipulate what is appropriate and advocates in their place a morality based on

50. David B. Wong, "Is there a Distinction between Reason and Emotion in Mencius?" *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 1 (1991): 31–44, at 41.

51. Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi," 109.

the spontaneous prompts of feeling" (*xin* 心).⁵² And Craig Ihara concludes that Mencius has a far more "visceral" account of how emotions lead to moral action than is imputed by the strong cognitivist view.⁵³ Philip Ivanhoe also stresses the crucial role of emotions in Mencius's ethics, but does so from a therapeutic standpoint. While he agrees with the criticisms of Ihara and Van Norden, he notes their failure to explain *how* exactly the process of "extension" is to be achieved. Ivanhoe thus shifts the problematic toward the *practice* of self-cultivation and argues that we should understand Mencius as trying to get King Xuan to develop his moral sense, not by providing him with "abstract, general reasons for moral action," but by "getting the king to feel a certain way about his people." This involves having the king "imaginatively reconstruct and reexperience" his original feeling of compassion for the ox, to reflect on it, and to prioritize it among the competing feelings he currently has, including his desire for power, wealth, and so on. Ivanhoe calls this procedure "analogical resonance," and while it involves a complex interaction of "knowing, feeling and practice," the feeling must be there because the entire process of self-cultivation is accompanied by the "joy and satisfaction" of realizing our nature. Our nature is inclined toward the fulfillment of our moral potential and our emotional responses both drive and validate this process because the very awareness that we are living properly gives rise to a distinct satisfaction, as well as a "profound sense of joy."⁵⁴ Ivanhoe's account effectively addresses the limits of the cognitivist approach by highlighting the crucial role of emotions in the practice of self-cultivation.

The stakes of this debate are high, both philosophically and historically. The basic argument is about whether, and the extent to which, emotional inclinations can furnish the ground and criteria of rightness; and if so, how we are to understand the relationship between emotions, on the one hand, and reason and cognition, on the other. Historically, the matter has bearing on how we are to evaluate thinkers like Mencius and the early Chinese ethical tradition more generally. A "two-root" theory positing that Mencius asserts both feelings and cognition as sources of moral direction would question the very coherence of Mencius's thought. Edward Slingerland, for instance, has followed Nivison in arguing that Mencius's thinking contains two competing metaphors that are in fundamental tension with one another: the "purely inclinational" ideal of *wuwei* 無為 that is "characterized by a feeling of spontaneous ease and graceful effortlessness," on the one hand, and the "externalist" ideal involving the use of force outside the self, on the other.⁵⁵ He explains the coexistence of these incompatible metaphors

52. Behuniak, *Mencius on Becoming Human*, 12.

53. Craig I. Ihara, "David Wong on Emotions in Mencius," *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 1 (January 1991): 45–53, at 52.

54. Ivanhoe, "Confucian Self Cultivation," 221–241, at 230, 233, and 224.

55. Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 8.

as a kind of ad hoc measure deployed by Mencius to address the limits of a moral theory based purely upon inclination:

[U]nlike plants naturally growing toward the light or water flowing downhill, people sometimes need to fight *against* the pull of natural inclinations in order to be moral. Since his primary metaphors for self-cultivation and virtue acquisition all involve going along with the natural tendencies of things, they cannot easily accommodate this insight, and Mencius is therefore forced to occasionally supplement them with the sort of externalist metaphors noted earlier, or with a related set of metaphors having to do with the application of strong external force by the Subject upon the Self.⁵⁶

Benjamin Schwartz has similarly suggested that the attribution of “thinking” to the mind reflects a recognition of a dichotomy of thinking and feeling in Mencius. The mind (though Schwartz translates *xin* here as “heart”) represents the “intentional organ of willing and thinking,” in contrast to the “unthinking” senses, which “can trigger either vast excesses of desire or repulsion which completely upset the balance of the emotions and dissipate man’s vital *qi*.”⁵⁷

A basic premise of the cognitive approach has been that while reason is ordered, structured, and intelligent, emotions are “raw” and “unreflective” and somehow need to be supplemented. The alternative is the unitary approach of Van Norden, Ihara, and Behuniak, who have stressed that emotive and cognitive sources of motivation must be seen as part of a higher integrated system. Feeling and thinking, then, cannot be fully distinguished in Mencius’s thought. James Behuniak has perhaps gone the furthest in positing a basic “inseparability of feeling and thinking” in Mencius’s thought. Translating *si* 思 as “thoughtfulness,” he has stressed that the term refers not to a purely cognitive process but to “active forms of engagement with feeling.”⁵⁸ The integrated model is often supported by reference to the physicalist model of reality based on the workings of *qi* 氣—the “vital force” or “configurative energy,” which, I noted earlier, was a concept that Warring States thinkers were beginning to invoke to explain the nature of reality and its changes and movements. The idea that all phenomena, including human feeling and cognition, were functions of the movement and configuration of *qi* could support this integrated reading.⁵⁹

The question of whether Mencius ultimately assumes a one-root or two-root model of motivation, and whether the workings of the body and mind, emotions

56. Ibid., 172.

57. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 272–273.

58. Behuniak, *Mencius on Becoming Human*.

59. For an overview of the physical theory of *qi* and its relevance for Mencius’s ethics, see Alan K. L. Chan, “A Matter of Taste: *Qi* (Vital Energy) and the Tending of the Heart (*Xin*) in Mencius 2A2,” in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. Alan K. L. Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 50.

and reason, are integrated or distinct, has been a fruitful one, inviting much reflection on the role of all these aspects of the self in Mencius's ethical theory. However, to read Mencius and early Chinese philosophy through such distinctions somewhat distorts the issues and fixes the terms of the discussion in ways that do not necessarily reflect their conceptual world. As an alternative to these approaches, I propose that we consider a conceptual distinction that does seem to be operative in Mencius's thinking, and that cuts across the divides of emotion versus reason, body versus mind. This is a distinction between partial inclinations and judgments, on the one hand, and objective ones, on the other hand, based on a broader understanding of the actual situation.

This distinction, as we have seen, was clearly delineated in the *Mozi*, and I propose that it is relevant to Mencius as well. Mencius insists that the mind is unique among the human faculties in its capacity to think and reflect, and that this capacity is to be distinguished from the senses of sight and hearing, which are simply attracted by "external things" and are incapable of such reflection. This is not a thinking versus feeling distinction: the mind also has preferences and desires. Although Mencius speaks of the importance of "making the desires few" (*gua yu* 寡欲) as we nurture our minds (*yang xin* 養心),⁶⁰ he also stresses the more positive task of cultivating desire for the right things. The difference between the mind and the body, then, has to do with their preference for different things:

Therefore I say mouths find savor in the same flavors; ears find satisfaction in the same sounds; eyes find pleasure in the same beauty. When it comes to our minds, could they alone have nothing in common? And what is it that our minds have in common? It is order (*li* 理) and rightness (*yi* 義). The sage is just the first to apprehend what our minds have in common. Thus order and rightness please our minds (*yue wo xin* 悅我心) in the same way that meat pleases our mouths.[6A7]⁶¹

The distinctiveness of the mind from the rest of the body lies not in its being impervious to feelings and desires; indeed, as part of our natural, physical endowment, our minds seek out, and experience pleasure in, the objects of their preference, just as the mouth, ear, and eyes desire and experience pleasure in things they crave, such as delicious food and beautiful objects. What differentiates the mind is that what it craves is "order" (*li* 理) and "rightness" (*yi* 義). Mencius contends that the mind has a capacity to perceive coherently what is, and also to grasp what is right, and that this represents the mind's characteristic inclinations. The workings of this mind to intuit what is right is what makes it the proper faculty through which to arrive at knowledge of how to optimize our lives and our

60. ICS Mengzi 7B35.

61. ICS Mengzi 11.7/59/6–8. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 125–126.

physical potentiality as human beings. This capacity to achieve understanding of the true workings of things is what makes the mind the highest faculty within the self, and why it is that those who seek to perfect themselves and become superior individuals would nurture the mind:

Some parts of the body are superior and others inferior; some are small and others are great. One should not harm the great for the sake of the small, nor should one harm the superior for the sake of the inferior. One who nurtures the smaller part of oneself becomes a small person, while one who nurtures the greater part of oneself becomes a great person. [6A14]⁶²

The mind's natural affinity for "order" and "rightness," and the possibility of cultivating a taste for what is right and good, point to a moral role for the emotions that avoids both bifurcating reason and feeling and collapsing the distinction between them. Mencius's conception of the mind and its activities suggests that what is distinct about the mind among all the other faculties is its ability to feel intelligently and to desire in ways that are conducive to the moral flourishing of the individual. This recognizes, on the one hand, that by virtue of our minds we are not simply determined by our physical circumstances. On the other hand, it suggests that neither the physical form nor its spontaneous impulses are unstructured or unintelligent, but are defined by a natural process and drive toward fulfillment.⁶³ As part of this physical form, but also as its highest faculty, the mind can clearly perceive good and bad, right and wrong, because it has access to the true and proper patterns of the world. For this reason, it is what makes it possible for the self to pursue, and ultimately achieve, the goal of actualizing its full human potential.

The relationship between what we would normally call "emotions"—the repertoire of feelings such as joy and anger, sadness and delight—and "the mind" thus cannot be adequately captured within the confines of moral psychology, with emotions constituting spontaneous responses to the world and the mind being directed by sound patterns of reasoning. Instead, it is that the emotions possess an optimal standard of fulfillment and satisfaction, and the mind, with its affinity for order and rightness, can help make this optimal realization possible. Be it in the case of "giving full expression to our hearts" and "achieving satisfaction" in the context of proper burial practices, or of pleasing the populace and realizing the highest form of pleasure (*le*), the criterion of rightness—as well as the guarantor of success—is the extent to which one understands the patterned workings of human beings, and can abide by them so as to achieve their utmost fulfillment.

62. *ICS Mengzi* 11.14/60. *Mencius*, trans. Bloom, 129.

63. On the moral nature as process, see Roger T. Ames, "Mencius and a Process Notion of Human Nature," in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. Alan K. L. Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 72–90.

CONCLUSION

The main approaches to Mencian ethics with regard to the role of emotions has been either to conceive of it as arguing that emotions as such are the source of moral direction, or as forwarding a “two-source” model in which emotions have to be steered and channeled through the deployment of reason. The former disregards the important role that cognition and reasoning have in Mencius’s moral theory, while the latter imputes to Mencius a reason-emotion dualism that is not applicable. I have endeavored to show that the division that modern philosophy has introduced between cognition and feeling does not map neatly onto the relevant distinctions in the case of Mencius. At the same time, while it is important to recognize the activities of thinking and feeling as intertwined, neither should we collapse nor render irrelevant the conceptual distinctions among them. When Mencius refers to the spontaneous prompts of moral feeling, these are not, strictly speaking, simply emotive, for they also involve judgments and assessments based on how things are in the world. It is not a claim that one’s emotional inclinations as such are what furnish the grounds of normativity.

According to Mencius, there exists a natural inclination in human beings to seek fulfillment of their innate nature through right forms of satisfaction. In invoking such inclinations to argue for the natural basis of morality, Mencius is not just appealing to what we would commonly refer to as “emotions.” The kind of patterned responsiveness that Mencius attributes to human beings involves right intuitions about the nature of reality and of one’s situation, as well as judgments of right and wrong. This requires the engagement of one’s thinking faculties and a distancing of oneself from certain immediate inclinations, but it does not mean a repudiation of one’s physical or natural self: to deploy one’s cognitive faculties is, in Mencius’s understanding, also to comply with certain natural workings and propensities. These are fully operative in the workings of the mind, which possesses an inclination and capacity to think, reflect, and function intelligently. The operations of the mind, no less than the workings of the rest of the body, represent biologically rooted, patterned ways of responding to the world.

This idea that the mind engages in intelligent, patterned activity in its way of seeking coherence, unity, and fulfillment shares some important commonalities with the views of Mozi, who is often regarded as diametrically opposed to Mencius because of his insistence on profit over virtue, and his appeal to reason and practical outcome in arriving at the proper criteria for human action. Without denying significant differences, however, it is clear that Mencius invokes the very forms of reasoning deployed by Mozi—that is, both Mencius and Mozi are united in attributing to human beings a capacity to know the world as it is, and to exercise sound forms of reasoning. Both acknowledge that there are certain natural laws governing the world, and that these laws are also operative in human beings through the workings of their minds and bodies. And finally, both

posit the criterion of sharability, or *tong* 同, as a means of validating the rightness of one's response to one's situation, be it in one's understanding or in one's course of conduct.

Mencius's endeavor to "naturalize" ethics is historically significant in several respects. Most widely appreciated is the fact that his insistence on the rootedness of moral potential in our natural inclinations was part of a bold claim that human morality derives from what is intrinsic to the nature of human beings, and is not merely a construct imposed upon our nature. Such an idea implied, in turn, a conception of the self as an autonomous source of norms and values. Like many Warring States thinkers, Mencius recognized that, in their feelings and desires, human beings were vulnerable to the push and pull of external things (*wu* 物) and were easily shaped and transformed by their environment. But by arguing that we possessed a capacity to reflect on the world and to understand its workings, he defended the idea that we could resist the onslaught of things and avoid simply conforming to our environment. Finally, asserting that morally as well as physically, human beings operated according to knowable, patterned processes, Mencius could claim that the self was intelligible and coherent. The naturalizing of ethical discourse was a major step towards conceptualizing the self as a patterned entity with an underlying dynamics that could be fathomed (*du* 度) by the mind. In thus exercising our distinct human capacity to know ourselves and the world, we could come to understand how to live optimally in the world, thereby achieving the fulfillment of our nature while abiding by the pattern workings of the cosmos.

The Multiple Valences of Emotions in the Zhuangzi

In the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (late fourth century BCE), the emotions achieve a psychological and moral complexity that is not present in the texts we have examined so far.¹ One of the most noticeable features of this text is the presence of multiple, and sometimes competing, perspectives on the nature of reality, the possibility of human knowing, and the norms and values that should guide human life. There is, on the one hand, a distinctly ascetic strand in which emotions are rejected as futile expenditures of energy that disturb one's peace of mind, are detrimental to one's well-being, and are thus best avoided. The sage confronts life with equanimity and calmness, accepting the course of things without agitation or regret:

When it came time to arrive, the master [Laozi] did just what the time required. When it came time to go, he followed along with the flow. Resting content in the time and finding his place in the flow, joy and sorrow had no way to seep in (*ai le bu neng ru ye* 哀樂不能入也). [3.7]²

Equally clear, however, is a strand recognizing that responding emotionally to our predicaments is not only natural and unavoidable but can also be good and proper—as in the case of affection toward one's parents.³ Even more compelling are signs pointing to a eudaimonistic ideal in the text, where joy and happiness

1. Significantly compounding the complexity for readers of the text is its highly composite nature, which reveals the hand of many authors, ideas, and concerns spread out over centuries. This chapter will focus primarily on the vision of the Inner Chapters (chapters 1–7), which by general scholarly consensus represent the oldest layer of the text. It will discuss passages from other chapters that contain significant discussions of the issues under consideration. Here again, I will occasionally refer to the figure called “Zhuangzi” as a term of convenience. For a breakdown of the text and characterization of its various layers, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 172–174.

2. Source passages are cited from *A Concordance to the Zhuangzi* (莊子逐字索引), ed. D. C. Lau, Ho Che Wah, and Chen Fong Ching. *ICS Series* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 2000), henceforth abbreviated as *ICS Zhuangzi*. This passages is from 3/8/20–21. Unless otherwise specified, the translations of the *Zhuangzi* that appear in this chapter are, with occasional modifications, from *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009). The passage numberings that follow quoted passages will follow those of the Ziporyn translation.

3. *ICS Zhuangzi* 4/10/18–19.

(*le* 樂) seem to be basic features of the fully realized life and arise from the achievement of harmony with the Dao.⁴

We are confronted, once again, with what appear to be disparate and contradictory accounts of the ethical role of emotions. This apparent ambivalence toward the emotions has been attributed to the fact that the received text of the *Zhuangzi* is a pastiche of many different writings produced by many authors over a long period of time. Recently, however, scholars have sought to explain the possible tensions in the text by way of a more complex philosophical inquiry into the status of emotions therein. Rejecting traditional readings of the text as advocating an ascetic posture of transcending the emotions altogether, they have highlighted the more positive connotations that emotions have in Zhuangzi's ethical vision. Amy Olberding, Chris Fraser, and David Wong have all emphasized that, despite their tendency to misfire and to disrupt one's peace of mind, the emotions are an integral and necessary part of the *Zhuangzi*'s conception of the perfected life.⁵ The optimal condition of the human being is thus one of properly realized and appropriate emotions, rather than of perfect equanimity and emotionlessness.

The endeavor to make sense of the apparently contradictory accounts of the emotions in the text has generally taken the form of an inquiry into the normative status of the emotions—that is, whether they are good or bad, proper or improper, and what role, if any, they ought to play in the moral life. This has led to the acknowledgment of a kind of “doubleness” in the *Zhuangzi*'s attitude toward the emotions—an ideal of detachment and transcendence of emotions, combined with a clear affirmation of the value of emotional engagement. This twofold orientation and its ethical implications have been interpreted in a variety of ways, but have been generally understood in terms of a kind of underlying tension in human experience having to do with competing identifications with the “human” and “Heavenly” realms.

The virtue of such an approach is that it captures the depth and complexity of the *Zhuangzi*'s conception of the emotions, as well as its recognition of the ambiguous ontological position of human beings: being both a part of the world and yet standing outside of it through their higher perceptual faculties, humans are uniquely situated to relate to the world from multiple vantage points. But the question of the normative status of emotions in the *Zhuangzi* may be misplaced, or at least, secondary. For while it is indeed the case that emotions play an integral role in the proper life, as conceived in the *Zhuangzi*, I do not think the text espouses a particular moral posture

4. On the eudemonistic aspects of Zhuangzi's ethics, see Chris Fraser, “Wandering the Way: A Eudaimonistic Approach to the *Zhuangzi*,” *Dao* 13, no. 4 (December 2014): 541–565.

5. See Amy Olberding, “Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Dao* 6, no. 4 (2007): 339–359; Chris Fraser, “Emotion and Agency in *Zhuangzi*,” *Asian Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (February 2011): 97–121; Wong, “Identifying with Nature,” 568–584.

toward the emotions as such. The emotions are, and can be, many things: they can be misapprehensions of the world, arising from one's limited and self-centered perspective onto the world; they can be natural emanations of our encounters with things; and they can be proper and appropriate forms of responsiveness, arising from a condition of harmony with the workings of the cosmos. They represent, then, an entire spectrum of possibilities, and their normative status depends on the degree to which they are in tune with the situation at hand and with the world at large.

Considered within this context, the diverse normative pronouncements that we find in the text about the emotions, and the emphasis on both detachment and engagement, do not necessarily indicate a posture of ambivalence, reflecting a condition in between two seemingly incompatible positions. Instead, they point to the multivalence of the emotions themselves, which in turn is rooted in the complex workings of the cosmos. In their emergence, transformation, and passing away, emotions display the patterns, movement, and directionality that pervade the universe. Moreover, to the extent that what determines the appropriateness or inappropriateness of emotions depends on whether or not they are in alignment with the workings of the cosmos, they are inseparable from the cognitive project of achieving knowledge of what the world is really like. They can represent true insight into the workings of the world, as well as a condition of attunement with these workings. Or, they may signal the self's misalignment with the world. This twofold identity of emotions as both cosmic reality and cognitive apprehension of the world ultimately achieves reconciliation in the human ideal of mobility, which I shall argue represents a crucially important aspect of Zhuangzi's thought—one that can help to resolve a number of long-standing scholarly controversies surrounding the text. Envisioned through the lens of mobility, the optimal condition of the human being is not to maintain fixity in one place, but to wander (*you* 遊) with ease and enjoyment (*le* 樂) through the world, transforming along with things and embodying the dynamism of the cosmic process.

EMOTIONS AND THE VIRTUE OF HARMONIOUS ALIGNMENT

There are diverse pronouncements about the emotions in the *Zhuangzi*. Certain emotions, such as fear, anxiety, or anger, are forms of human distress and are thus, by definition, harmful. These, however, have a clear source—namely, a failure of right perception. When we respond to situations with strong feelings of dislike and aversion, we are approaching them from within our limited perspective and petty personal preoccupations. Such feelings are the very symptom of our lack of harmony with the reality around us, and of our failure to grasp the true nature of our situation. This is illustrated by the story of a certain Lady Li who, after bitterly

lamenting her plight upon having been taken captive by the forces of the Qin state, finds exquisite pleasures awaiting her at the Qin royal court:

Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king's luxurious bed and feasting on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead don't regret the way they used to cling to life? [2.41]⁶

Just as Lady Li's initial sorrowful response to her situation turns out to have been unwarranted, so it is, Zhuangzi suggests, that our worst fears and apprehensions—such as our abhorrence of death—may also be completely groundless:

How, then, do I know (*zhi* 知) that delighting (*yue sheng* 說生) in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death (*wu si* 惡死) I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? [2.41]⁷

Similarly, in the story of the monkey trainer distributing nuts to his monkeys, Zhuangzi makes a related point of how a failure to envision how things truly are can cause one to get pointlessly worked up about things, exhausting one's energy in the process. The story relates how merely changing the order of the portions allotted can cause the monkeys to be furious in the one instance and pleased in the other:

A monkey trainer was distributing nuts. He said, "I'll give you three in the morning and four in the evening." The monkeys were furious. "Well then," he said, "I'll give you four in the morning and three in the evening." The monkeys were delighted. This change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of their present "this" [*yin shi* 因是]. Thus, the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter's Wheel. This is called "Walking the Two Roads." [2.22–23]⁸

That the monkeys would respond with anger to an offer of three nuts in the morning and four in the afternoon, and with delight to four nuts in the morning and three nuts in the afternoon, seems from a certain perspective laughable: we know that there has been no substantive change in the total number of nuts they have been given. But the wise trainer knows better than to impose his own views

6. ICS Zhuangzi 2/6/28–2/6/30.

7. ICS Zhuangzi 2/6/28.

8. ICS Zhuangzi 2/5/4–6.

on the matter; instead, he goes along with the situation by giving the monkeys what they want, knowing that it really makes no difference either way. And so it is with the sage: recognizing the short-sightedness of ordinary creatures in their emotional responses to things, he adapts himself accordingly so as to optimize the situation at hand.

One implication of this is that, when one is in full accord with the cosmic flow and accepts one's destiny as part of this flow, there is no room for emotions—positive or negative. One should thus strive to “fast one's heart-mind” (*xin zhai* 心齋) [4.8]⁹ and attain such a state that “joy and sorrow cannot enter” (哀樂不能入) [3.7, 6.39].¹⁰ The person of sagely attainment—the Consummate Person (*zhi ren* 至人), or the Genuine Person (*zhenren* 真人)—remains impervious to the changing circumstances around him and is unfazed by those things that arouse strong emotions in ordinary people. Such a person accepts things as they come, experiencing no fear, no grief, no disturbance that might arise from concern for his own personal well-being: “Even death and life can do nothing to change him—much less the transitions between benefit and harm!” [2.39].¹¹ The extraordinary characteristics that mark the Genuine Person from the lot of ordinary humans, as recounted in chapter 6, point primarily to this capacity to proceed through life with equanimity:

The Genuine Human Beings of old slept without dreaming and awoke without worries. Their food was plain but their breathing was deep. The Genuine Human Beings breathed from their heels, while the mass of men breathe from their throats. Submissive and defeated, they gulp down their words and just as soon vomit them back up. Their preferences and desires (*qi yu* 嗜欲) run deep, but the Heavenly mechanism (*tian ji* 天機) is shallow in them. The Genuine Human Beings of old understood nothing about delighting in being alive or hating death. They emerged without delight, submerged again without resistance. Swooping in they came and swooping out they went, that and no more. They neither forgot where they came from nor asked where they would go. [6.6–9]¹²

Unlike ordinary human beings, for whom “desires and preferences run deep” and the “Heavenly mechanism is shallow,” a Genuine Person is one who neither delights in living (*yue sheng* 說生) nor hates death (*wu si* 惡死), and can thus live without worry (*you* 憂).¹³

9. ICS Zhuangzi 4/9/28–4/10/9.

10. ICS Zhuangzi 3/8/21, 6/17/30.

11. ICS Zhuangzi 6/2/73.

12. ICS Zhuangzi 6/16/2–6.

13. Zhuangzi, trans. Ziporyn, 6.7–6.11. ICS Zhuangzi 6/16/2–7.

And yet, despite these recurring exhortations to rise above emotions and strive for equanimity, it is clear that the *Zhuangzi* is more than an ascetic text that argues for the transcendence of emotions. For one thing, at a certain practical level, emotions simply *are*. They are the natural emanations of our humanness. In chapter 2 (“*Qiwulun*” 齊物論, “Discourse on Making Things Equal”), the emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are listed alongside other human intentionalities and tendencies as facts of human existence, emerging apparently without rhyme and reason:

Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, plans and regrets, transformations and stagnations, unguarded abandonment and deliberate posturing—music flowing out of hollows, mushrooms of billowing steam! Day and night they alternate before us, but no one knows whence the sprout. That is enough! That is enough! Is it from all of this, presented ceaselessly day and night, that we come to exist? [2.6]¹⁴

Emotions, here, are part of the never-ending pageantry of human events—human instantiations of larger cosmic forces in which we are caught up and can never fully understand. They are, in this sense, fully natural, and part and parcel of the inevitable course of things. But insofar as they are a symptom of the very confusion and bewilderment with which we confront the world, they are deeply problematic; they are but instances of our futile mental exertions and failure to exercise efficacy in the world:

We give, we receive, we act, we construct: all day long we apply our minds to struggles against one thing or another—struggles unadorned or struggles concealed, but in either case tightly packed one after another without gap. The small fears leave us nervous and depleted; the large fears leave us stunned and blank. Shooting forth like an arrow from a bowstring: such is our presumption when we arbitrate right and wrong. [2.6]¹⁵

Emotions, then, aren’t simply good or bad, right or wrong; they can be many things. As forms of natural human responsiveness, they may represent harmful emanations from our fixations and preoccupations. But they are also a necessary feature of proper human engagement with the world. When it comes to the Genuine Person’s attitude toward life and death, for instance, we are told:

Receiving it, they delighted in it. Forgetting about it, they gave it back. This is what it means not to use the mind to resist the Dao, not to use the Human to assist the Heavenly. Such is what I’d call being a Genuine Human Being (*zhen ren* 真人). [6.9–11]¹⁶

14. *ICS Zhuangzi* 2/3/29–31.

15. *ICS Zhuangzi* 2/3/26–28.

16. *ICS Zhuangzi* 6/16/6–7.

It is not the case, then, that the Genuine Person has no emotions whatsoever: she delights (*xi* 喜) in receiving life but has no regrets when it is time to give it back; it is something to be forgotten (*wang* 忘). Rather than maintaining fixity—be it on the side of having emotions or not having them—one responds (*ying* 應) with appropriate emotions. It is the appropriateness of the engagement, and the flexibility of adapting to one's situation, that matters. This is how we might understand the injunction to not “use the mind to resist (*yuan* 捐) the Dao” and not “use the Human to assist (*zhu* 助) the Heavenly.”

To the extent that the ideal person should be responsive, it is not freedom from emotions that we should aspire to, but freedom from inappropriate emotions—those that do not tally with how things are. The goal, then, is to achieve proper responsiveness to things, and the locus of this responsiveness is the *xin*—the heart-mind. The *Zhuangzi* compares the *xin* of the Consummate Person to a mirror that perfectly reflects things as they are and is thereby able to respond properly to them:

The Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror: he does not push things forward, he does not go to receive them. He responds but does not store. Thus he can master things (*sheng wu* 勝物) without harm. [7.13–14]¹⁷

The proper disposition that we should seek to attain vis-à-vis the world, then, is neither to “push things forward” nor to “go to receive” them. That is, we should not impose our will upon things, nor should we go out of our way to accommodate them. But this does not mean we should stand apart and remain detached from the world. The Consummate Person “responds” (*ying* 應) but “does not store” (*bu zang* 不藏). This describes the nature of optimal emotions, as well: emotions, when they are proper, arise spontaneously from our harmonious alignment with the Dao—the true course of things. We can receive things joyfully as they come, but we should be ready to let them go when it is time to do so. This is how we come to “master things without harm.”

Ultimately, the fact that the Genuine Person delights in receiving life intimates a more general normative claim in the text. The appropriateness of this delight suggests not only the importance of responding emotionally in accordance with one's situation but also the value of life itself and of the emotions that accompany a life fully lived. Without attaining joy and happiness (*le* 樂), one cannot be said to have fulfilled one's potential as a human being. To this extent, a capacity for certain kinds of emotions is an essential aspect of realizing the optimal form of life. This goes beyond what we would normally call the realm of “feeling”: the kind of happiness that the *Zhuangzi* refers to is a certain human condition of fulfillment, bound up—as we shall see—with the freedom of unobstructed movement and the mastery of one's capacities. Zhuangzian

17. With significant modifications to Ziporyn's translation. ICS *Zhuangzi* 7/21/21.

happiness is the human counterpart of the unimpeded movement of the cosmic process itself.

“EMOTIONLESS EMOTIONS”? INTERPRETING
THE MULTIVALENCE OF EMOTIONS

In the *Zhuangzi*, then, we have a complex and multivalent picture of the emotions, involving a number of distinct proposals for what the emotions are: they are natural and inevitable human responses to the world; they are mistaken perceptions, arising from a failure to harmonize with the times and with one's situation; and they are a necessary feature of the properly realized life and a marker of sagely attainment. The potential tensions among these various accounts present us with an interpretive problem, and much recent scholarly discussion of the *Zhuangzi* has been concerned with reconciling these various aspects. Hans-Georg Moller and Eske Møllgaard have sought to defend a version of the ascetic reading of the text in an effort to show how, given its rejection of emotions, the *Zhuangzi* can uphold the importance of joy and happiness. Moller explains away the possible contradiction by observing, “The perfect Daoist happiness is joy without joy. It is not tied to any particular emotional sensation and is not felt in a specific way.”¹⁸ What differentiates the problematic emotions from the proper ones, according to Moller's account, is a rising above “emotional sensation” and “felt” experience: “The perfect emotional quality is a *feeling one no longer feels*.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, Eske Møllgaard invokes a distinction between “subjective” and “objective” emotions: he posits that the emotions that are validated in the *Zhuangzi*, such as certain kinds of joy (*le*), amount to an “objective emotion of joy (*le*) that is *purified of all subjective sentiments* and therefore totally open to the experience of the world.”²⁰

While these readings rightly acknowledge the complex ethical character of emotions in the *Zhuangzi*, they rely on that familiar set of conceptual oppositions, entrenched in modern Western thinking, that we have seen in interpretations of other early mainstream thinkers. They are equally inapplicable in the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*. There is no reason to assume that, when the *Zhuangzi* is referring to grief or to optimal forms of joy or happiness, it does not involve a “felt” bodily experience, or that it corresponds to an openness to the world that is not particular to the subjective experience of the individual. To justify the presence of emotions in this reduced way effectively strips them of elements that are arguably basic to them—namely, their groundedness in felt experience and in

18. Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 65.

19. Ibid.

20. Eske Møllgaard, *An Introduction to Daoist Thought: Action, Language and Ethics in Zhuangzi* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 72; my italics.

the evaluative activity of the individual. Indeed, among the core values that the *Zhuangzi* shares with a number of fourth-century BCE texts is a concern with preserving the health and optimal functioning of one's self (*shen* 身), which is as much a physical entity as it is a mental and spiritual one.²¹ In passage 2.40, we find a direct critique of the idea that the sage is detached from the physical world and unconcerned with particular aspects and events of this world:

Ju Quezi asked Chang Wuzi, "I have heard the Master relating the claim that the sage does not engage in projects, does not seek benefit, does not avoid harm, does not pursue happiness, does not follow any specific course. He says something by saying nothing, says nothing by saying something, and thus does he wander, beyond the dust and grime. The Master considered these rude and careless words, but I believe they are the practice of the Mysterious Dao. What do you think?

Chang Wuzi said, "These words would send even the Yellow Emperor into fevers of confusion . . . the mass of men are beleaguered and harried, the sage is dim and dense, standing shoulder to shoulder with the sun and moon, scooping up time and space and smooching them all together, leaving them all to their own slippery mush so that every enslavement is also an ennobling. He is there taking part in the diversity of ten thousand harvests, but in each he tastes one and the same purity of fully formed maturation. For to him each thing is just so, each thing is right, and so he enfolds them all within himself by affirming the rightness of each." [2.40]²²

Chang Wuzi's point here is precisely that what makes a sage a sage is not a capacity to transcend the sensual reality of the world but, rather, to engage with and embrace, each and all, and to ultimately "affirm the rightness of each." This does not negate the fact that there is, in the text, another ideal of sagehood very much about detachment from the world of ordinary beings and achieving a state of emptiness (*xu* 虛). But the solution is not then to somehow balance the two so that emotions can be "purified of all subjective elements" and become pure world, as it were. The ideal of objectivity that Moller and Møllgaard invoke in their analysis does not seem to tally with the perspectives and ideas of the text.

These ascetically inclined interpretations, favoring a transcendent reading of Zhuangzi's sagely ideal, are somewhat at odds with the dominant current of scholarship, which has tended to emphasize the various ways in which emotions—in their full-fledged, subjective, phenomenal form—have a more positive ethical role to play. Nevertheless, the basic conceptual opposition of "subjective" and "objective" continues to prevail in various ways, most notably in the idea

21. For an overview of this development, see Lewis, *Construction of Space*, ch. 1; as well as Csikszentmihaly, *Material Virtue*.

22. *ICS Zhuangzi* 2/6/21–28.

of a tension between “engaged” and “detached” models of sagehood, as well as between “the human” and the “Heavenly.” And much of the recent scholarship on emotions in the *Zhuangzi* has sought to explain how these potential oppositions might be resolved in a philosophically coherent account. Thus, the work of Amy Olberding on Zhuangzi’s grief, Chris Fraser on emotions and agency, and Philip J. Ivanhoe on knowledge and skepticism are united by a shared interest in the productive tension between the two sides of these various oppositions and how they may be reconciled in various ways.²³

Focusing specifically on the emotion of grief, Amy Olberding appeals to a dialectical model to explain the presence of two seemingly irreconcilable models of bereavement in a passage that relates Zhuangzi’s response to the death of his wife:

When Zhuangzi’s wife died, Hui Shi came to condole. As for Zhuangzi, he was squatting with his knees, drumming on a pot and singing.

“When you have lived with someone,” said Hui Shi, “and brought up children, and grown old together, to refuse to bewail her death would be bad enough, but to drum on a pot and sing—could there be anything more shameful?”

“Not so. When she first died, do you suppose that I was not able to feel the loss? I peered back into her beginnings; there was a time before there was a shape. Not only was there no shape, there was a time before there was energy. Mingled together in the amorphous, something altered, and there was the energy; by the alteration in the energy there was the life. Now once more altered she has gone over to death. This is to be companion with spring and autumn, summer and winter, in the procession of the four seasons. When someone was about to lie down and sleep in the greatest of mansions, I with my sobbing knew no better than to bewail her. The thought came to me that I was being uncomprehending towards destiny, so I stopped.”²⁴

Olberding calls attention to the fact that Zhuangzi does not seem to regret having grieved for his wife—something that calls for explanation in light of the ideal of equanimity and detachment that appears elsewhere in the text. Olberding considers, and then rejects, the possibility that, in his grief, Zhuangzi was abiding by “a norm of nature.”²⁵ She points, rather, to a “fundamental ambivalence” in Zhuangzi’s response to his loss: “While urging complete and total equanimity, he also allows for a moderate position in which the brief spasm of initial grief may be accommodated in deference to what he judges to be the exceedingly difficult

23. Olberding, “Sorrow and the Sage”; Fraser, “Emotion and Agency”; Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Tao,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1993): 639–654.

24. Retaining the translation of Graham cited in Olberding, “Sorrow and the Sage.” *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, trans. A. C. Graham (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981): 123–124, at 18. *ICS Zhuangzi* 18/48/9–13.

25. Olberding, “Sorrow and the Sage,” 342.

task of eradicating grief altogether.”²⁶ What justifies particular outbursts of grief is the sheer fact that these emotional responses reflect the nature of our lived engagement, which is necessarily particular. However, the force of such outbursts is moderated by a dialectical rationale for grief—that is, it is through our capacity to feel the anguish occasioned by death that we can appreciate the joy of life in all its fullness and transformation. This reading makes a certain degree of intuitive sense, but both the ideal of moderation and the psychological dialectic that it relies on appear to be rather foreign to the logic and concerns of the *Zhuangzi*.

David B. Wong has also interpreted this passage in terms of a doubleness of vantage points that is presumed to be required in a fully realized existence—in this case, the perspectives of the “Heavenly” and the “Human.” The thrust of the argument, however, is that the enterprise of “identifying with Heaven” is a matter of overcoming the very idea of a dichotomy between the human and the Heavenly realms—that is, of recognizing that we cannot simply adopt some ideal of a Heavenly perspective that is devoid of the human aspect. Thus, when it comes to Zhuangzi’s grief, Wong explains that the two responses of grief and detachment do not represent a puzzle, since they arise from the human capacity to relate to Nature as both part and whole:

As a small part of the whole, he is a man, and as a man, he must feel the loss of his wife and sob over her death, but as a man with intellect and imagination capable of embracing the whole, he can come to accept her death, his felt loss, and also to continue to embrace his wife as part of the whole, as one who has laid down in the “greatest of mansions.”²⁷

The upshot of this approach is that introducing a dichotomy between the Heavenly and the Human would represent an instance of the kind of splitting of reality into artificial binaries that Zhuangzi so much disapproves of.²⁸ Quite noticeably, however, Wong’s account invokes a rather sharp distinction between feeling and thinking—between the man who “must feel the loss of his wife and sob over her death” and the man “with intellect and imagination” who accepts his loss.

26. *Ibid.*, 347.

27. Wong, “Identifying with Nature,” 571.

28. In a somewhat different context, Philip J. Ivanhoe has also discussed the problem of the possible tension between the “human” and “Heavenly” perspectives in the *Zhuangzi*, and has highlighted that Zhuangzi does not advocate relinquishing the human perspective in favor of the Heavenly. While I would agree with this, I do not accept his “therapeutic” paradigm of knowledge. Ivanhoe explains that the *Zhuangzi*’s invoking of the Heavenly perspective is “part of his attempt to undermine what he regards as our overreliance upon the intellect. Zhuangzi believes that this will help to lead us back to our spontaneous inclinations and intuitions.” Although it is clear that Zhuangzi warns against the limits of propositional knowing and certain narrow forms of rational thinking, I question Ivanhoe’s bifurcation of “intellect” and “spontaneous inclinations and intuitions.” In my view, the optimal forms of knowing in *Zhuangzi*—and ultimately, of feeling—is both spontaneous and intuitive and highly cognizant of the processes of the world. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 196–214.

Finally, Chris Fraser, writing of the role of emotions in the *Zhuangzi* more generally, similarly stresses the presence of two competing orientations in the text. His account accepts the ideal of equanimity that is emphasized in the text, but seeks to reconcile it with our more commonsense intuitions, which regard “appropriate emotional responses to beneficial or harmful situations a crucial component of a well-developed moral sensitivity and a good life.”²⁹ Fraser’s concern, then, is not so much to harmonize competing elements within the text as to show how Zhuangzi’s ethics can be seen as philosophically plausible, in light of the apparent exclusion of the affective dimension in moral life. The account he proposes is what he calls “the Virtuoso View.” This Virtuoso View is shown to be compatible with emotional responsiveness: while it rejects intense and disruptive emotions, it can be reconciled, for instance, with “a general sense of ease or peace,” as well as with a concern for the well-being of people whom one is connected to, such as one’s parents. It does not, Fraser stresses, “advocate totally forsaking all affective attitudes and abandoning all commitments to particular projects.”³⁰

Rather than seeking to balance the two orientations toward emotions found in the text, as Olberding does, Fraser highlights the very tension between them. What we are confronted with are two basically incompatible experiences: the “engaged moment” and the “wandering” moment. In the former, we are involved in particular projects and situations, while in the later we transcend particular circumstances and are part of the cosmic flow of things. The tension between the two is not something we can or should try to eliminate; indeed, it is this very tension that marks our human condition. Taking his cue from Thomas Nagel, Fraser argues that Zhuangzi’s Virtuoso ideal signals a “fundamental dichotomy at the core of human agency: the unavoidable conflict within a self-aware human agent between an internal, engaged perspective and an external, detached one.”³¹ As Nagel explains these standpoints in the opening lines of *The View from Nowhere*:

[How] to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creatures with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole.³²

Fraser agrees with Nagel that not only is the conflict between these standpoints “ineliminable,” it is this very ineliminability that is the source of our possibilities

29. Fraser, “Emotion and Agency,” 97.

30. Ibid., 110.

31. Ibid., 98.

32. Nagel, *View From Nowhere*, 3.

as ethical agents. Indeed, it is, as Nagel puts it, “one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics.”³³

Fraser’s observation that basic to Zhuangzi’s conception of the human condition is a capacity to occupy more than one vantage point is a significant insight. It recognizes the importance of shifting and multiple perspectives as a central feature of Zhuangzi’s ethical vision. And it acknowledges that Zhuangzi continues to affirm the particularity of human experience—messy emotions and all—while positing the need to stand outside of one’s own first-person experience. What is not clear, however, is whether, in the case of Zhuangzi the matter can be properly discussed in term of a distinction between “subjective” and “objective,” as invoked by Nagel. It is worth noting that Nagel’s distinction is a document of—and about—a contrast that is a peculiar feature of a modern and Western philosophical trajectory. This fact of itself, of course, does not disqualify it as a relevant conceptual tool, but it is a question whether—and to what extent—the human/Heaven divide as invoked in the *Zhuangzi* can be mapped onto the subjective/objective divide, as Nagel conceives it. For while the achievement of higher knowing—apprehending the Dao or the true course of things—depends crucially on the possibility of stepping out of the confines of one’s first-person subjective vantage point, what one arrives at is not “objectivity” in Nagel’s sense, which is about transcending the characteristics of a particular vantage point.³⁴ Nor is it about objectivity in the sense invoked by Moeller and Møllgaard—a non-feeling, non-subjective posture toward the world.

I depart from these approaches in that I regard the apparent puzzle of Zhuangzi’s complex vision of emotions as a matter not of ambivalence but of multivalence. The potential conflict represented by seemingly competing accounts of emotions in the text can be more plausibly explained, I think, in terms of Zhuangzi’s naturalistic theory, according to which human emotions possess a standard of appropriate responsiveness that mirrors the transformations of the cosmic process. The issue, then, is not one of how to reconcile different normative accounts within a single and coherent ethical perspective (i.e., how one thinker can embrace apparently competing views), but of how the emotions can *be* different things, and can be recognized as such. The first order of the day is thus to investigate what the emotions *are*, according to the text.

Such an investigation needs to be prior to the endeavor to identify the *Zhuangzi*’s ethical position on the emotions. Emotions—and each particular

33. Ibid., 23.

34. Ibid., 10: “A view or a form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is. . . . We may think of reality as a set of concentric spheres, progressively revealed as we detach gradually from the contingencies of the self.”

emotion—can signify many things, which means their normative status in each situation depends on its fittingness and appropriateness to the situation. This fact introduces a complication into the idea that the movement from subjectivity to objectivity is one of ever-diminishing emotive content. If we pursue a more naturalistic inquiry into what the emotions are, we find that the proper condition of human emotions is—no different from other natural phenomena—to be dynamic and to mirror and embody the transformations that pervade the cosmos. Like all other living things, emotions emerge and pass away, beyond our control and comprehension: “Day and night they alternate before us, but no one knows whence they sprout” [2.6].

This approach yields a very different picture of how emotions can be reconciled with the higher vantage point of sagely knowing. For if a basic step in achieving a proper relationship with emotions is to step out of the confines of one’s immediate first-person point of view, the progression is not one of increasing detachment from a personalized, subjective point of view but, rather, a facility of occupying other vantage points and achieving fittingness in one’s responses. The sage is one with the order and movement of the world, and thus always responds appropriately to the time and the circumstances. Just as the monkey trainer takes into account the seemingly irrational preference of his monkeys by acting in accordance with it, knowing that it really makes no difference, so does the sage harmonize with the preferences of those around him, adapting himself accordingly. This is what it means for the sage to be at rest on the potter’s wheel of Heaven: like the celestial bodies moving through the heavens, the sage is constantly in motion, adapting his perspective to the situation at hand. The point of “Three in the Morning,” ultimately, is that we should not try to find some detached, all-seeing vantage point from which to know the world. Instead, it is to move through it, responding appropriately to circumstances as we confront them. The human ideal is one of mobility.

HOW THINGS ARE: COSMIC PATTERNS AND HUMAN REALITY

In the *Zhuangzi*, emotions—optimally realized—are cosmic correlates in the life of a human being: vehicles through which we can know the world and partake of its patterns and dynamics. Although this is a theme we have seen in other mainstream Warring States texts, it is in the *Zhuangzi* that we find the most detailed discussion of the workings of the cosmos and their connection to human emotions. Indeed, a striking feature of this text is its copious descriptions of the natural world: the elements that constitute it, the diverse animals and plants that populate it, and the movements and processes that animate it. Underlying this profusion of descriptions is the assumption that the cosmos is knowable and

characterized by certain intelligible patterns, and that these patterns are the proper object of human understanding. These concerns are embedded in a number of basic, recurring terms in the text, most notably *xing* 性 (inborn nature, the nature of things), *ran* 然 (what is so of itself), and *li* 理 (underlying pattern, coherence). It is also embodied in the concept of *qing* 情 which, like *xing*, straddles the divide between cosmic and human realities. The vision of the cosmos as patterned and intelligible has direct relevance for human beings, giving rise to a particular conception of what human beings are like, what their potentialities are, and how they ought to live properly in the world.

The idea that things possess characteristic, underlying patterns emerges in a number of contexts. We see it in the theme of the diversity of life forms in the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, “Wandering Far and Unfettered” (*Xiao yao you* 逍遙遊). Here, we find showcased the sheer variety of creatures that inhabit the earth, with all their differing characteristics and capacities: great birds that soar in the skies and cicadas that hop about on the ground; tortoises that live for hundreds of the years and mayflies whose life span expires within two weeks. This appreciation of the diversity of living creatures presupposes that there is something like a natural constitution that is distinctive to each being. Thus, we find in chapter 17 (“Autumn Floods,” *Qiu Shui* 秋水) the differences among the various creatures of the world being described in terms of the distinct skills (*ji* 技) and natures (*xing* 性) they possess:

A great stallion can gallop a thousand miles in a day, but it cannot catch mice as well as a cat, for that requires a different kind of skill. Kites and owls can catch a flea or discern the tip of a hair on a dark night, but in the daytime they are blinded and cannot even make out a mountain range, for that requires a different inborn nature (*shu xing* 殊性).³⁵

These natural differences are further manifested in correspondingly diverse preferences, values, and judgments—a fact that has direct implications for Zhuangzi’s conception of emotions.

Intelligible patterns are present not only in the structure of things but also in the unfolding of events—in their movement and trajectory of change. Many passages in the text describe the transformations of the world as operating according to a cyclical pattern. In a passage in chapter 5, “Confucius” is quoted as making the following observation:

Death and life, surviving and perishing, failure and success, poverty and wealth, superiority and inferiority, disgrace and honor, hunger and thirst, cold and heat—these are the transformations of events (*shi zhi bian* 事之變), the course of destiny (*ming zhi xing* 命之行). Day and night they

35. ICS *Zhuangzi* 17/44/31–32.

come to us, one replacing another, and yet our understanding (*zhi* 知) can never compass what it is that begins them. [5.14]³⁶

This passage is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it explicitly links the cyclical pattern of the cosmos to the patterns governing human existence in all realms—biological, social, moral, and financial. The course of human events is one with the natural and inevitable flow of things, just as day gives way to night and night gives way to day. This, the text asserts, is the realm of fate or destiny (*ming* 命). Second, it highlights the fact that the workings of the world are infused with motion and change: the various stages in this cosmic unfolding form a dynamic process characterized by the “transformation of events” (*shi zhi bian* 事之變) and the “course of destiny” (*ming zhi xing* 命之行).

The idea that there is a patterned unfolding of events in the cosmos is even more palpable in the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, where the term *li* 理 (pattern, coherence) emerges with greater frequency. Significantly, the term is invoked only once in the Inner Chapters, in the famous passage about Butcher Ding, who skillfully and with flawless precision maneuvers his knife in accordance with the “natural pattern” (*tianli* 天理). In later instances, *li* is used some twenty-three times, as part of more schematized accounts of the workings of the world, which is increasingly understood as animated by an intelligible, cyclical process of change.³⁷ A passage in chapter 17 refers to this process as the “underlying pattern of the myriad things” (*wan wu zhi li* 萬物之理):

Waxing and waning, filling and emptying, each end is succeeded by a new beginning. This is a way of describing (*yu* 語) the method by which they are in the greatest sense just right for their position (*da yi zhi fang* 大義之方), and explaining (*lun* 論) the underlying pattern of the myriad things (*wan wu zhi li* 萬物之理). The beginning of things is like a galloping horse, transforming with each movement, altering at each moment. What should you do? What should you not do? You will in any case be spontaneously transforming (*zi hua* 自化).³⁸

36. *ICS Zhuangzi* 5/15/1–2.

37. The term *li* 理 originally referred to the natural patterns on jade. It would be of tremendous importance in Neo-Confucian thought, which is also distinguished by its particularly scientific aspiration to grasp the underlying pattern of things. For a history and discussion of the concept of *li*, see Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of *Li* as Principle,” *Tsing-hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 4, no. 2 (1964): 123–149; Brook Ziporyn, “Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence: *Li* in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 3 (2008): 401–422; and Ziporyn, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought. Prolegomena to the Study of Li* (Albany: State University of New York, 2012).

38. *Zhuangzi*, trans. Ziporyn, 72. Translation of 萬物之理 modified from Ziporyn’s “the way all things fit together.”

The text does not just point to the processes of waxing and waning, and filling and emptying, that make up the flow of events in the world, constituting the “underlying pattern of the myriad things” (*wan wu zhi li* 萬物之理). It also notes that such processes are the basis upon which to “describe” (*yu* 語) and “explain” (*lun* 論) this pattern. It is, thus, explicit in its concern with putting forth a unifying theory that could explain how everything in the world works and how all events are linked in a coherent whole.

The pattern of cosmic transformation furnishes a model for human beings, but the relationship is a complex one. On the one hand, if the pattern of the cosmos is a dynamic one of ceaseless movement and change, the proper condition of human beings is to emulate this pattern of change: we are to be *like* nature itself in our actions (*wei* 為), and thus “spontaneously transforming” (*zi hua* 自化) in the manner of the myriad things themselves. But emulating the cosmos and embodying its processes also entail each thing’s being itself, exhibiting its own, distinct characteristic tendencies. In human beings, this means recognizing some flaws in our constitution, as represented by our *qing* 情. At the same time, we possess a capacity to grasp the order of the world and discern the nature and dispositions of things. Thus, the picture of an ordered cosmos implies the existence of an intelligent consciousness that can perceive this order and its underlying workings.

This relationship is not just a structural correspondence in which the standard of intelligence is matched by the form of its object. It is also strategic: it is by understanding the workings of the cosmos and the underlying disposition of things that human beings can achieve mastery of life and enjoy success. Take, for instance, the following passage about water:

Now, if water is not piled up thickly enough, it has no power to support a large vessel. Overturn a cupful of water in a hole in the road and you can float a mustard seed in it like a boat, but if you put the cup itself in there it will just get stuck. The water is too shallow for so large a vessel. And if the wind is not piled up thickly enough, it has no power to support Peng’s enormous wings. That is why he needs to put ninety thousand miles of air beneath him. Only then can he ride the wind, bearing the blue of heaven on his back and unobstructed on all sides, and make his way south. [1.4]³⁹

In contrast to the descriptions of water given in the *Mencius*, the only naturalistic account of water that we find in the Inner Chapters describes those attributes that make it amenable to use by humans. This is significant: the thrust of this passage, as of many others that describe the workings of the natural world,

39. ICS *Zhuangzi* 1/1/11–13.

is to offer insight into how human beings can best make use of things. It is by properly gauging the properties of things that we can maximize our efficacy in the world and fulfill our human potential.

When the “things” we are engaged with are other living creatures, rather than elements or atmospheric conditions, the properties in question involve none other than inclinations, preferences, and dispositions. The importance of such understanding is highlighted in the various anecdotes in the *Zhuangzi* related to the figure of the animal trainer, an instance of which we have encountered in the story of the monkeys. One who works with animals knows their natural constitution and propensities, their preferences and delights. If one wishes to tame a tiger, for instance, one must be attentive to the tiger’s inherent ferocity and exercise caution when feeding it:

[Peng Boyu said]: “Don’t you know how the tiger trainer handles it? He doesn’t feed the beast live animals for fear of arousing its lust for killing (*sha zhi zhi nu* 殺之之怒). He doesn’t feed it uncut sides of meat for fear of arousing its lust for dismemberment (*jue zhi zhi nu* 決之之怒). He carefully times out the feedings and comprehends the creature’s propensity for ferocity (*nu xin* 怒心). The tiger is a different species from man but can be tamed through affection for its feeder. The ones it kills are the ones who cross it.” [4.16]⁴⁰

A failure to attend to the natural propensities of an animal—even one without a ferocious nature, such as a horse—can have fatal consequences:

[A] man who loves horses even to the point of gathering their shit and piss in jeweled boxes may still get his skull or chest kicked in if he smacks away a mosquito on the unbridled animal at the wrong time. Despite the best intentions, his solicitousness backfires on him. Can you afford to be careless? [4.16]⁴¹

The secret to properly training animals—and by extension, to properly mastering one’s circumstances and achieving an optimal life—is to understand and be in accord with (*xun* 順) the dispositions and inclinations of things, and to arrive at fitting responses to them. To simply impose a fixed standard, with no consideration for how things are, is to be like the ruler of Lu, who was so taken by the singing of a bird that he had it brought to his palace and regaled with fine food and exquisite music. Without realizing that the bird’s greatest joy was to fly about in freedom among its own kind, he treated it as he would an honored human guest, causing nothing but distress and unhappiness.⁴²

40. ICS *Zhuangzi* 4/11/14–17.

41. ICS *Zhuangzi* 4/11/17–19.

42. ICS *Zhuangzi* 19/49/21–22.

HUMAN INCLINATIONS AGAINST THE COSMIC FLOW

In the *Zhuangzi*, the term *qing* 情 generally refers to certain distinct characteristics, inclinations, and dispositions of living creatures—human beings included—as well as to the more general workings and conditions of reality. Among the thirty-nine instances in which the term is used in the text, all but nine appear in the Outer Chapters. This corroborates our findings about *li* (pattern) and the intensifying concern, over the course of the Warring States period, with the patterned processes that operate in the world. The most widely discussed passage concerning *qing* in the *Zhuangzi* is that of 5.21, which consists of an exchange between Zhuangzi and Huizi about the character of the sage and whether or not he can be without *qing*. The conversation begins with Zhuangzi explaining to Huizi that the sage is a special hybrid category of being: one who is human and yet not human, Heavenly and yet not Heavenly. Such a person, he claims, possesses the physical form (*xing* 形) of a human being, but lacks the characteristic inclinations (*qing*) of a human being. When Huizi presses for an explanation, a discussion ensues:

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “Can a human being (*ren* 人) really be without the characteristic human inclinations (*wu qing* 無情)?

Zhuangzi said, “Yes.”

“But without the characteristic human inclinations, how can he be called a human being?”

“The Way gives him this appearance (*mao* 貌), Heaven gives him this physical form (*xing* 形), so why shouldn’t he be called a human being?”

“Since you call him a human being, how can he be without the characteristic human inclinations?”

Zhuangzi said, “Affirming some things as right and negating others as wrong (*shi fei* 是非) is what I call the characteristic human inclinations. What I call being free of them means not allowing likes and dislikes (*hao wu* 好惡) to damage you internally (*nei shang qi shen* 內傷其身), instead making it your constant practice to follow along with the way each thing is of itself, going by whatever it affirms as right, without trying to add to the process of life.”

Huizi said, “If he doesn’t add to the process of life, how can his body be sustained?”

Zhuangzi said, “The Way gives him this appearance, Heaven gives him this physical form, and he doesn’t allow likes and dislikes to damage him internally. Now you, on the other hand, treat your spirit like a stranger and labor your vitality, leaning against a door screen reciting your disputations or nodding off across your desk. Heaven chose your physical form, and here you are using it to crow on about ‘hardness’ and ‘whiteness’!”⁴³

43. ICS *Zhuangzi* 5/15/20–25.

In raising the possibility that the sage can be without *qing* (*wu qing* 無情), this passage does not dismiss the importance of emotions in an ordinary sense, as some older translations of the text would have it.⁴⁴ Zhuangzi's point is more specific: he explains that *qing*, in human beings, boils down to a tendency to *shi fei* 是非: to affirm and negate, or judge right and wrong. To be without *qing* is to refrain from such activities so as to keep one's likes and dislikes (*hao wu* 好惡) from causing damage to oneself internally (*nei shang qi shen* 內傷其身).

In other passages in the Inner Chapters, we find a number of instances of the more general usage of *qing*. In passage 1.11, a conversation between Jian Wu and Lian Shu concerning "madman Jieyu" describes the latter's ramblings as "vast and excessive, with no regard for the way people really are" (*renqing* 人情).⁴⁵ In passage 6.23, we find a discussion of the general patterns governing life and the cosmos as illustrations of *qing*, of how things are: "Life and death are fated (*ming* 命), and that they come with the regularity (*chang* 常) of day and night is of Heaven—that which humans can do nothing about, simply the way things are" (*wu zhi qing* 物之情).⁴⁶ Whether with reference to human beings or to things in the world, then, *qing* refers to the inherent processes that govern the course of life through birth, life, and death, and that forms a context of inevitability that shapes our existence.

Returning to passage 5.21 on the sage being "without *qing*," we see that the problem with human *qing* is that it represents a tendency to distance ourselves from how things actually are, and thus to cut ourselves off from the cosmic flow. It is their *qing* that causes people to engage in senseless debates, form attachments, cherish life, and abhor death in a way that brings about frustration and grief. *Qing* is a constitutional feature of human beings that works against the achievement of oneness with the patterns that pervade the cosmos. Such a conception is quite different from some of the senses of *qing* we have encountered thus far. In the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出, *qing* was the collective term for those emotions and desires that arose in the nature (*xing* 性) in the wake of its encounter with things in the world. In the *Mencius*, *qing* possessed a similar general sense of the essential, underlying inclinations of things, but pointed, in the case of human beings, to an innate potentiality for goodness (*shan* 善) arising from certain innate emotive inclinations.

An important difference between the accounts of *qing* in the *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi* is that, in the latter, it is about the judgments, aspirations, and mental constructs that arise from our limited, subjective experiences and concerns.

44. Burton Watson and James Legge translate *qing* as "feelings" and "passions and desires," respectively. *Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 71; *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, trans. James Legge (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

45. ICS *Zhuangzi* 1/2/14.

46. ICS *Zhuangzi* 6/16/22. The expression *wu zhi qing* 物之情 occurs three times in the Outer Chapters, in ICS *Zhuangzi* 11/28/14, 17/44/32–17/45/1, and 20/53/15.

Mistaken about the nature of our own predicament, it prevents us from accepting our nature and destiny. Thus, the *Qiwulun* chapter explains that our emotions of joy and anger, sorrow and happiness (*xi nu ai lei* 喜怒哀樂) emerge from our tendency to affirm and negate, and to deploy our minds oppositionally (*xin dou* 心鬪) [2.6]; and that Lady Li's weeping (*ku* 哭) upon her capture turns out to have been misplaced, and based on a wrong prediction of her fate at the Qin court [2.41]. These instances of unjustified emotions represent fruitless exertions brought on by evaluative judgments that do not properly reflect the situation at hand. Such emotions are not so much obstructions to perceiving how things truly are as they are symptoms of a failure of right perception. Accordingly, rectifying the situation is a matter of achieving greater perspicacity and insight into the workings of the world. Such higher forms of understanding are necessary if we are to harmonize with the cosmos, "making it [one's] constant practice to follow along with (*yin* 因) the way each thing is of itself (*ziran* 自然), going by whatever it affirms as right, without trying to add to the process of life" [5.22].⁴⁷

But what is this superior vantage point and what role do emotions play in the realization of such a vantage point? In his discussion of these issues in the *Zhuangzi*, A. C. Graham has described the optimal posture toward the world as one of spontaneity—which, he emphasizes, is not of the Western romanticist sort that "extols intensity of spontaneous emotion however much it distorts reality by subjectivity." Instead, Zhuangzi's spontaneity is the "spontaneous incipience of the act when reflecting the situation." This "objective" perception of the world is, as Graham puts it, a "dispassionate mirroring of things as they are." And in his reading, emotions can only disturb and obstruct the process.⁴⁸

Although I have been arguing for true and objective knowing as a central goal in Zhuangzi and among Warring States philosophers more generally, I do not agree with this account of the emotions. Emotions are far more than agitations that get in the way of a clear reflection of the world. If there is a destructive tendency of human *qing* to "affirm and negate," and to arouse all sorts of misguided emotions, this does not capture the entire scope of what would count as emotions in Zhuangzi's vision. *Qing*, after all, is not simply "emotion," as it is conventionally construed. And if a central preoccupation of the text is the achievement of true and objective insight into the nature of reality, then essential to the very cognitive enterprise are those channels of perception and understanding that are bound up with emotions—intuitions, emotional responses (such as joy, grief), and the drive to achieve satisfaction and fulfillment. Emotions can be vehicles by which we come to know the world and instantiations of true knowing.

Let us consider once again the anecdote of the monkey trainer and his angry monkeys. The wisdom of the monkey trainer lay not in the fact that he recognized

47. ICS *Zhuangzi* 5/15/22–23.

48. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 191–192.

no difference in whether one distributed three nuts in the morning and four in the afternoon, or vice versa. It was, rather, that he understood the importance of recognizing the inclinations of the monkeys, and the fact that their seemingly irrational preferences needed to be attended to. The trainer may have thought that there was substantively no difference between distributing three nuts in the morning and four in the afternoon or vice versa, but he understood that, for the monkeys, there *was* a difference and that he should therefore act in accordance with their inclinations. He could pursue the right course of action because he was able to transcend his own inclinations as to how things ought to be and put himself in the position of the monkeys.

The trainer, then, was not refraining from emotional engagement as such, but was preventing his own preferences and desires from getting in the way of his interactions with the monkeys. In the same way, what makes the sage an exemplary figure is not his “objectivity”—his imperviousness to the pull of emotions and preferences, and his capacity to transcend particular vantage points. It is his appreciation of the tendencies, inclinations, and workings of things, and his aptitude in responding to that awareness. In the currency of our own times, we might say that the wisdom of the sage stems from his empathy. The vantage point of the trainer is a form of self-transcendence, to be sure, but it alights upon the vantage point of another, particular vantage point. Insight into the true nature of things is thus achieved by stepping out of one’s own inclinations, but not subsequently into the “nowhere” position of objectivity, if by this one refers to a non-feeling, non-particular vantage point that transcends any sort of first-person experience.

Ultimately, then, sagely knowing in the *Zhuangzi* is not a matter of totalistic seeing, a privileged vantage point that is superior to particular vantage points. Nor is it to be found in the gaping, irreconcilable gulf between the extremes of emotional engagement and perfect equanimity. Instead, it is a capacity to stand outside the limits of one’s particular vantage point and to consider other perspectives, thereby achieving harmony with them. This requires an ability move through the world. Zhuangzi’s conception of true knowing and wisdom, then, is premised on the logic and dynamics of mobility—a fact that is captured in the all-important Zhuangzian concept of *you* 遊, or “wandering.” Literally, *you* possesses the sense of uninhibited, boundless, carefree movement through space. But it also has important metaphysical and ethical connotations: it is about freedom of thought, expression, and movement. *You* joins together total harmony with the spontaneous processes of nature with total freedom. While the ethics of “wandering” points to the importance of emotional resonance more generally, and of realizing a spontaneous responsiveness to things in the world, it is also bound up with one emotion in particular: joy (*le* 樂). The joy corresponding to *you* is the joy of unimpaired, smooth, and effortless movement through the world. This joy is perhaps the clearest indication that the optimal life of the human being is not

to maintain fixity in one place, but to move with ease through the world, thereby embodying the dynamism of the cosmic process itself.

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF WANDERING AND ATTUNEMENT

Literally speaking, *you* 遊 refers to the everyday, physical activity of moving through space. Many references to *you* in the *Zhuangzi* simply relate the fact of traveling somewhere, and they have no philosophical significance. But even in such cases, the term has a particular connotation, referring to a certain kind of movement—that which is undirected and unconstrained by a predetermined trajectory or goal. This movement is further characterized by ease and facility, and by freedom from physical limitations. It is about moving *beyond* boundaries and limits, in the manner of those perfected individuals (*zhi ren* 至人) whose extraordinary qualities include the capacity to “wander beyond the four seas” (*you hu si hai zhi wai* 遊乎四海之外).⁴⁹ From here, the transition to the ethical and metaphysical sense of the term is fairly direct: *you* is a kind of mental, physical, and spiritual freedom that one achieves by moving beyond the confines of one’s limited perspectives and experiences. This freedom has its corollary in a certain kind of emotional experience, ranging from a sense of carefree ease to that of delight or happiness (*le* 樂). The delight of wandering is the delight of joyous attunement with the world and of fully realizing one’s human potentiality.

You, then, is an important instance of how the properly realized life involves the presence of certain types of emotional experiences, and even requires validation through them. But its semantic range implies an entire world of connections that unites a conception of optimal human activity with the cosmic vision that we have seen—a vision of the world as dynamic, ever-transforming, and constantly moving. It is, moreover, an all-encompassing and integrated world in which human beings form a part. *You* is an ideal of attunement that is achieved through activity—be it physical, mental, or spiritual: when we *you*, we embody the flow and unimpeded movement of the cosmos itself. As considered here, *you* emerges as a critical node that brings together the cosmic and human realms, and that reveals the logic and structure underlying the ethical vision of emotions in the text. These dimensions are exemplified in two of the most well-known passages in the *Zhuangzi*: the story of Cook Ding (ch. 3) and the humorous exchange between Zhuangzi and Huizi over the “happiness of the fish” (ch. 17).

The story of Cook Ding is representative of a genre of anecdotes in the *Zhuangzi* that recount the virtuoso feats of individuals who have attained exceptional mastery of certain skills—often in various humble crafts—and are thus deemed sages. Cook Ding, with his ability to carve up an ox with speed, grace,

49. ICS *Zhuangzi* 1/2/16 and 2/6/19.

and precision, wins the admiration of King Hui of Liang, who cannot help voicing his awe and admiration. Upon receiving such praise, the Cook explains:

What I care about is the Dao, which goes beyond mere skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants (*shen yu* 神欲行). I go along with Heaven's patterns (*tian li* 天理), strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are (*yin qi gu ran* 因其固然). So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I've had this knife of mind for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room—more than enough for my wandering blade (*you dao* 遊刃). That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

However, whenever I come to a complicated joint, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety until—flop! The whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.[3.3–5]⁵⁰

"Excellent!" the king replies. "I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!" (*yang sheng* 養生).

This passage exemplifies the *Zhuangzi*'s emphasis on skill and practical mastery as instantiations of true knowing. While this is a fairly straightforward and uncontroversial point, there remains an open question as to how to understand the kind of knowing that such skill and practical mastery involve. The idea that early Chinese philosophers were not concerned with knowledge "as such," independent of practical aims, has been, I have argued earlier, an obstacle to appreciating important features of Mozi's conception of knowledge. This is an idea that scholars have appealed to in their readings of the *Zhuangzi* as well, and to the interpretation of the Cook Ding passage. Some have maintained that the kind of skill-based understanding exemplified by Cook Ding is distinct from the

50. *ICS Zhuangzi* 3/8/4–3/8/11. The translation of this passage is from *Zhuangzi*, trans. Watson, 46–47, with modifications.

reason-based knowing that aspires to understand the properties of “reality”—the latter being presumably the Western model as established by the ancient Greeks. As Robert Eno explains:

A fundamental achievement of early Greek philosophy was the distinction between reason and other processes of understanding, and the exclusive privileging of reasoned knowing as grounded in objective reality and therefore philosophical. In early China perhaps the most fundamental of philosophical outcomes was the rejection of reason as privileged and the identification of practical knowing as the principal means of obtaining certain understanding of the world.⁵¹

Eno further elaborates the meaning of “reasoned knowing” as the idea that “true wisdom is knowledge of the structure of the natural world,” and that human beings have access to this structure by virtue of their capacity for discursive reasoning, which partakes of the same structures as the natural world itself.⁵² The early Chinese opted for a different approach, Eno claims, one based on skilled practice, on “arts,” rather than on discursive thought and language.

By this point, it is difficult to see how “knowledge of the structure of the natural world” was not a concern in the *Zhuangzi*, or was foreign to the kind of skill-based wisdom that is promoted in the text. In the context of the Cook Ding passage, the reasoned knowing that is purportedly absent in the *Zhuangzi* is embedded in the very practical endeavor of carving up an ox. Consider, first, Cook Ding’s knife. One who has achieved perfect mastery of wielding his knife should ply it in such a way that it encounters no resistance, as if the knife itself were wandering freely. That Cook Ding’s knife could *you* in this manner is more than a matter of specialized skill: it is about harmonious and efficacious engagement with the world he is in contact with. It exemplifies a capacity to navigate smoothly and effortlessly through the world. This requires a consummate understanding of the “Heavenly patterns (*tian li* 天理) and dedicated, sustained practice so as to be one with these patterns in one’s own movements. Cook Ding’s virtuosity is thus as much science as it is art: if it is exhibited in the successful maneuvering and fluid motions of the “wandering blade” of the butcher, this can only be achieved through a higher understanding of how things are. It is only if one penetrates reality and fully grasps its workings that one achieves mastery over it and moves harmoniously through it. Through *you*, the dynamic, flowing world and the lithe adaptability of the butcher form interpenetrating realities. And through their harmonization, a person of consummate skill activates the motive force within herself and achieves fulfillment of her highest desires and

51. Robert Eno, “Cook Ding’s Dao and the Limits of Philosophy,” in *Essays on Skepticism*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 127–151, at 128.

52. *Ibid.*, 129.

aspirations. It is thus no coincidence that the cook describes his act of plying the knife as “spirit mov[ing] where it wants.” (*shen yu xing* 神欲行).

You is more fully showcased in another famous passage—the one in chapter 17 that relates the playful debate between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi 惠施 (380–305 BCE) about the happiness of the fish.⁵³ This story similarly attests to the importance of unimpeded movement as a quality of the world and as a human virtue, but it also draws out some further implications. First, *you* becomes a point of convergence between human beings and the other living creatures of the world. Although all things have their characteristic way of *you*-ing, they are one in their shared capacity to realize their nature and flourish through *you*. Second, the importance of *you* is bound up with its special link to the emotion of happiness or delight (*le* 樂). And finally, *you* as movement points to the Zhuangzian conception of knowledge or wisdom as involving a capacity to approach the world from multiple, and shifting, vantage points.

The background to the entire incident is, significantly, an actual excursion involving carefree wandering:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were wandering (*you* 遊) along the bridge over the Hao River.

Zhuangzi said, “The minnows swim about so freely (*you* 遊), following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness (*le* 樂) of fish.”

Huizi said, “You are not a fish, so whence (*an* 安) do you know the happiness of fish?”

Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, so whence do you know I don’t know the happiness of fish?”

Huizi said, “I am not you, to be sure, so I don’t know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact.”

Zhuangzi said, “Let’s go back to the starting point. You said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from here, up above the Hao River.”⁵⁴

Zhuangzi’s final refutation of Huizi is amusing but unsatisfying. Huizi’s question can reasonably be taken as a legitimate challenge to Zhuangzi’s claim that he, though not a fish, can access what fish are feeling. The question is legitimate, but the response appears to be nothing more than wordplay. The joke has to do

53. Hui Shi is traditionally identified as a logician from the School of Names. On Hui Shi and his diverse portrayals in early texts, see Lisa Raphals, “On Hui Shi,” in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*, by Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998): 143–161.

54. *ICS Zhuangzi* 17/47/11–14.

with the interrogative *an* 安, which can mean both “how” and “where from.”⁵⁵ Zhuangzi answers a question of *how* he knew, by responding *where from* he knew—that is, from above Hao River.

If we consider the punchline more seriously, we might read these lines as being ultimately about the nature and scope of human knowing, and how we can make claims as to what we know. A short essay by the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Hideki Yukawa frames the discussion as an early debate between two traditions of knowing: one based on reason and empiricism, the other based on deep intuition. The fact that Zhuangzi gets the last word would suggest that it was the latter that was emphasized in the early Daoist philosophical tradition. Yukawa himself, scientist though he is, professes to have greater sympathy for this more intuitive approach, with the caveat that one who seeks to understand the natural world must steer clear of one or the other extreme.⁵⁶ Recent scholars have delved further into the epistemological implications of this passage. Roger T. Ames, pointing to the double sense of *an* 安 in the debate between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi, has noted the particular relevance of the spatial situatedness of the knowing agent as a central concern in this story. Zhuangzi’s knowledge, Ames emphasizes, is premised on the particular experience of the knower, and is thus situational, contextual, and “irreducibly social.” Summing up the passage, Ames writes:

The point of this anecdote of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi in which Zhuangzi claims that he knows that the fish are happy *from here* on the bridge is that knowledge is always proximate, situational, participatory, and interpretative. It is because Zhuangzi is continuous with his surrounds that “knowledge” of the situation emerges, where the fishes are no less entailed in the realization of the happy experience than Zhuangzi and Hui Shi themselves. It is the situation rather than some discrete agent that is properly described (and prescribed) as happy.⁵⁷

Although I would strongly agree that the spatial emphasis is important, I interpret its sense and significance quite differently. Ames argues, citing the philosopher Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973 CE), that the locational aspect of knowledge points to its primary concern with “‘realizing’ a viable community rather than ‘knowing’ the truth about the world.”⁵⁸ Here again we see the familiar distinction between truth as such and a contingent truth whose parameters are determined by social and practical considerations. Although I share the sense

55. Graham, *The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-Tzū* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 123.

56. H. Yukawa, “Zhuangzi: The Happy Fish,” in *Experimental Essays on Zhuangzi*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press, 2010), 56–61.

57. Ames, “Knowing in the Zhuangzi,” 220–221.

58. *Ibid.*, 222.

that the priority of forging a community has profoundly shaped the meaning and conception of knowledge in the early Chinese tradition, I would not so easily dismiss the possibility that early Chinese thinkers were genuinely concerned with knowing what the world was like and how it functioned.

I propose an alternative way to make sense of Zhuangzi's emphasis on his spatial location. When Zhuangzi shifts the focus onto the physical standpoint from which he is viewing the fish—that is, the view from above the Hao River—he establishes more than the fact of a situational continuity between himself and the fish: he also provides grounds for knowing what their experience is like. Identifying with the fish means that Zhuangzi can invoke his own experience to know their experience. What is the basis of this identification? If we return to the opening passage of the story, we learn that Zhuangzi and Huizi are engaged in an activity that connects them to the fish in a very particular way:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were wandering (*you* 遊) along the bridge over the Hao River.

Zhuangzi said, "The minnows swim about so freely (*you* 遊), following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish."

Zhuangzi, Huizi, and the fish are all engaged in *you*-ing 遊. They are thus not simply part of a single, participatory experience: they are all doing the same thing. When Zhuangzi, observing the spontaneity, naturalness, and uninhibited movements of the fish, remarks on their happiness, he is speaking from his own experience of happiness in his carefree springtime excursion with his companion. The fish are doing the fishly counterpart to what Zhuangzi and Huizi are doing as they wander across bridge on the Hao River. Zhuangzi knows the happiness of the fish because he, too, feels free, spontaneous, and in tune with the world. For Zhuangzi, the fish are not just an object of consideration but also fellow creatures with which he can identify. And through his own happiness, he can grasp something of the experience of the fish.

This resonance and identification with the fish, based on the shared experience of *you*, unsettles the distinction between the knower and the known, but does not fully dissolve it. And it forecloses neither the possibility of knowledge as such nor a meaningful conception of knowing agency. What it does show is what I believe to be a crucial dimension of the account of knowledge that is forwarded in the *Zhuangzi*: mobility. What is important to highlight about the discussion of *you* in this passage is the fact that free and unimpeded movement is not only the occasion that links Zhuangzi and the fish into a common situation; it is also the basis of an analogical relationship between them. It is this common nature that is the source of Zhuangzi's insight into the reality of the fish, and that gives him access to their happiness; he, too, knows what it is like to move freely through the world, in a condition of perfect attunement with his surroundings.

CONCLUSION

Despite numerous passages suggesting that emotions and desires are best avoided and that the sage is characterized by detachment and calmness, the *Zhuangzi* does not posit a philosophy of asceticism. Indeed, as I have endeavored to show, it does not espouse any particular policy toward emotions as such, in the sense that one ought to embrace or repudiate them, be ambivalent towards them, or espouse a moderate balance between the two positions. In themselves, they are neither good nor bad. Instead, the text recognizes the multiple valences of emotions, seeing that they *can* be proper or improper depending on the extent to which they are fitting, which is a matter of whether they are in accord with the reality of things or contravene this reality. At the same time, the text acknowledges that emotions, like other phenomena in the world, possess a workings and a natural pattern. That they are born, undergo development and change, move forward and retreat, and decline and pass, away is simply part of the natural course of life—phases in the normal unfolding of our engagement with the world. In this sense, they have a life span and a life cycle.

The *Zhuangzi*, then, identifies the emotions both as a natural part of our existence—part of what we go through—and as an object of understanding whose qualities and attributes we possess. This latter is what enables us to achieve a distance from our own emotions and envision what the emotions, as such, are like. And it allows us to differentiate between those emotions that are in keeping with reality—and thus to be accepted—and those that mark our misalignment and failure to live with the way things are, as in our feelings of grief, anxiety, fear, and regret.

As we have seen in the other texts of the early mainstream tradition, it is the workings of the natural world that provide the proper guidelines for determining the optimal form and manner of human activity—including one's engagement with emotions. The pattern of the natural world offers a model of how human beings, as part of this world, should operate. This corresponds to the central importance in the *Zhuangzi* of knowledge and perception as defining capacities in human beings. When fully realized, they can bring us to a condition of harmony with the broader cosmic process, and thus to the joy of freedom and mastery of our circumstances. When they are limited and obscured, they represent the imposition of our narrow, individual concerns—an “affirming and negating” that misapprehends how things are and makes it difficult to navigate through the world.

If optimizing our situation depends on achieving true insight into the workings of reality, this cognitive attainment is not just a matter of detached knowing—a “dispassionate mirroring of things as they are”; nor is it a nonrational, “practical knowing” that is exclusively directed toward practical activity; nor, again, is it a kind of knowing that can only be defined “situationally.”

Bypassing the dichotomies of emotion versus reason and subjective versus objective that are inherent in these interpretations, I have argued for a different paradigm of knowing—one based on a conception of mobility epitomized by the ideal of *you* 遊, or wandering. *You* brings together the happiness of attunement with the world, with the joy (*le* 樂) of unimpeded movement and the actualization of one's characteristic propensities. This joy is perhaps the clearest indication that the optimal life of the human being is not to maintain fixity but to move with ease through the world, transforming along with things and thereby embodying the dynamism of the cosmic process itself. When Zhuangzi defends himself from Huizi's challenge by claiming that he knows the happiness of the fish "from here, up above the Hao River," he affirms that his knowing is firmly perspectival and that it can recognize the richness, complexity, and multivalence of the world's boundless profusions in a way that is both immediate and self-transcendent.

The Composite Self and the Fulfillment of Human Nature in Xunzi

Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310/210 BCE) is most readily known for his declaration that “human nature (*xing* 性) is bad (*e* 惡).”¹ As he explains, human nature is bad because people are naturally inclined to pursue the satisfaction of their immediate sensual desires, and these spontaneous promptings possess no inherent sense of restraint or rightness. Morally speaking, then, the innate dispositions and inclinations of human beings—what Xunzi calls *renqing* 人情—are deeply problematic. As Xunzi dramatizes in an imagined exchange between the ancient sage kings Yao and Shun:

Yao asked Shun: “What are people’s innate dispositions (*ren qing* 人情) like?”

Shun replied, “People’s innate dispositions are most unlovely (*bu mei* 不美)! Why ask about them? When one has a wife and son, one’s filial affection (*xiao* 孝) towards one’s parents declines. When one’s appetites and desires are fulfilled, one’s devotion (*xin* 信) to friends declines. When one’s rank and salary are full, one’s loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to one’s lord declines. People’s innate dispositions? People’s innate dispositions? They are most unlovely. Why ask about them? Only in the case of the worthy is this not the case.”²

As Xunzi highlights here, the innate dispositions of human beings are “most unlovely” (*bumei* 不美) because they are inclined toward personal satisfaction, and operate independently of how people should properly feel and act toward one another.

1. The dates attributed to Xunzi vary widely. Here, I follow those proposed by John K. Knoblock, “The Chronology of Xunzi’s Works,” *Early China* 8, no. 8 (1982): 28–52. Xunzi’s infamous declaration that “human nature is bad” furnishes the title of ch. 23 of his work.

2. Xunzi ch. 23. Translations from the Xunzi are mostly modified from two main sources: *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, trans. John K. Knoblock (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988–1994); and *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Passages with no translations cited are my own. Source passages are cited from *A Concordance to Xunzi (Xunzi Yinde)*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), hereafter cited as HYXY. This passage is from HYXY 90/23/75–77. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 249.

Given their potentially wayward tendencies, what makes it possible for human beings to become good is their distinct capacity to overcome the spontaneous workings of their inborn nature (*xing*) through the intelligent operations of the mind—what Xunzi calls “deliberate effort,” or *wei* 偽. *Wei* is what allows people to choose goodness and rightness over the satisfaction of their physical yearnings, and it arises from their capacity for thought (*lu* 慮) and reflection (*si* 思). It would seem, then, that there is a dichotomy at work in Xunzi’s thought between the spontaneous feelings, desires, and physical impulses arising from one’s innate nature and the thinking that takes place through conscious exertion. In this sense, Xunzi’s ethical vision appears to be diametrically opposed to that of Mencius when it comes to explaining the sources of goodness; for while Mencius assumed that goodness stemmed from the unimpeded growth and functioning of the innate moral nature of human beings, Xunzi insisted that it was the result of cultivating the innate nature through proper norms and right practices—that is, through rightness (*yi* 義) and ritual (*li* 禮). These, Xunzi argued, had been devised by the sages through the deployment of their cognitive faculties:

The sage accumulates reflections and thoughts (*ji si lü* 積思慮), and practices conscious effort and reasoned activities (*wei gu* 偽故) so as to produce ritual (*li* 禮) and rightness (*yi* 義), and establish proper models and measures. Thus, ritual and rightness, and proper models and measures, are produced from the deliberate efforts of the sage; they are not produced from people’s nature.³

“Deliberate effort” was thus what made it possible for the sages to come up with standards and practices that could be used to reform the inborn nature and steer people toward goodness.

Such assertions have given rise to the view that Xunzi regarded emotions and desires per se as “bad,” and that he considered goodness as requiring their suppression by the intelligent directives of the mind. One of the clearest recent articulations of such a reading is the following passage in Torbjörn Lodén’s study of Xunzi’s moral theory:

Xunzi emphasizes the opposition between original evil and acquired goodness, and this opposition seems to involve feelings and reason. Original human nature gravitates toward the realm of feeling and emotion, whereas the personality of the noble person or the sage, and his acquired goodness, gravitates toward the realm of reason.”⁴

3. Xunzi ch. 23, HXYX 87/23/24. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 250.

4. Torbjörn Lodén, “Reason, Feeling, and Ethics in Mencius and Xunzi,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 4 (2009): 612.

The dichotomy between emotions and reason is invoked alongside a number of other categorical distinctions, most notably, internal versus external, innate versus acquired, body versus mind, and spontaneous desire versus right judgment.

Edward Slingerland, following David Nivison's voluntarist model and invoking Xunzi's frequent use of craft-based metaphors, has characterized Xunzi's moral theory as one of "externalism" in which human nature can only be *made* good through the exertion of some external force. Xunzi, in this reading, conceives of the inborn nature as "a recalcitrant raw material in need of violent reshaping so that it might be 'transformed' (*hua* 化) into a shape dictated by external standards or measuring tools: the carpenter's square and ruler, the inked marking line, or the balance scale."⁵ Benjamin Schwartz has similarly stressed that, in Xunzi, we cannot derive any sources of moral motivation from anything inborn: in his account, Xunzi "negates any inborn spontaneous tendency toward 'humanity and righteousness' within the human heart and denies that the 'objective' structures of morality which we find embedded in the tradition of '*li* and righteousness' (*li yi*) could have derived from any moral propensity innate in the human organism."⁶ Philip Ivanhoe states this even more plainly when he writes that Xunzi "did not believe we *have* an innate moral sense at all." In his account, morality for Xunzi "is something we can and must acquire in order to lead a fully satisfying life, but we can acquire it only by coming to understand and appreciate the accumulated wisdom of human culture; it is not something we have an innate feeling of or taste for."⁷

According to a prevailing reading, then, Xunzi holds that what makes morality possible is not something we can locate in the innate constitution of human beings. Instead, it is something that is external to it, determined by what the mind approves of, and achieved through effort. Goodness, being the result of deliberate and conscious exertions, must thus originate from the application of some kind of "external" force—namely, ritual practices and moral norms—that must be applied to shape the moral nature. And because of the interlinking of the various dichotomies I have just noted, this general way of reading Xunzi's ethical thought has led to the conclusion that there exists in Xunzi's conception a bifurcation of reason and emotion in which being good requires asserting the rational will against the workings of one's nature. In the words of Bryan Van Norden: in contrast to Mencius, who held that "a human must seek that which she desires

5. Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 218. See David S. Nivison, "Xunzi on 'Human Nature,'" in *The Ways of Confucianism*, ed. David Nivison and Bryan Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996), 203–214; and also David S. Nivison, "Xunzi and Zhuangzi," in *Virtue, Nature, and Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 176–187.

6. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 292.

7. Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Human Nature and Moral Understanding in the Xunzi," in *Virtue, Nature, and Agency*, ed. T. C. Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 237–250, at 245.

the most,” Xunzi claimed that “a person’s actions are determined, not by what he desires, but by what he approves of.”⁸

Some recent scholars have focused on the role of emotions and desires in Xunzi’s thought, but in ways that extend the rationalist model, thus showing that the higher awareness of the sage was such that it recognized the importance of satisfying one’s emotions and desires for reaching even greater personal fulfillment. T. C. Kline, for instance, explains that “By forming new dispositions that produce different desires with new objects, the cultivated person creates new forms of satisfaction and enjoyment inaccessible to the rustic *xiaoren*.”⁹ Michael Nylan has similarly argued that, for Xunzi, the perfected individual chooses to conform to rituals, moral rules, and other forms of self-restraint that allow for the gratification of long-term desires through the constraint of short-term ones, thereby maximizing pleasure.¹⁰ David Wong observes that a key difference between Mencius and Xunzi lies in the fact that “for Xunzi the desire to do good and the sense of duty are not original to human nature but derived from calculation on what is in our self-interest.”¹¹ And Kurtis Hagen, pursuing the utilitarian theme, concludes that “Xunzi seems to be operating *ultimately* within a desire-based consequentialist, prudential paradigm.”¹²

I shall approach the matter somewhat differently here. Although I would acknowledge that the satisfaction of desire and personal benefit were of concern to Xunzi, to assert that self-interested motives were his ultimate concern seems to me a misplaced emphasis. I will argue instead that the emotions were of vital importance in Xunzi’s ethical theory insofar as Xunzi considered the optimal condition of human beings to be one in which emotional and bodily satisfaction, higher intelligence, and knowing all converged. Self-realization was thus not a zero-sum game in which one suppressed and controlled the emotions through one’s rational will, or else brought them to conformity with external norms and practices. Nor was it a calculated enterprise of maximizing pleasure. It was, rather, about achieving optimal realization and fulfillment of one’s natural endowment by “nurturing one’s natural emotions” and “following one’s desire”¹³ so as to exhibit perfect beauty and form.¹⁴ To achieve this was to bring oneself in alignment with the very patterns and workings of Heaven and earth. Such alignment was the standard against which human activity was ultimately to be measured.

8. Van Norden, “Mengzi and Xunzi,” 118.

9. T. C. Kline III, “The Therapy of Desire in Early Confucianism: Xunzi,” *Dao* 5, no. 2 (2006): 235–246, at 245.

10. Nylan, “On the Politics of Pleasure.”

11. David B. Wong, “Xunzi on Moral Motivation,” in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency*, ed. T. C. Kline and P. J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 135–142, at 145.

12. Kurtis Hagen, “Xunzi and the Prudence of *Dao*: Desire as the Motive to Become Good,” *Dao* 10, no. 1 (2011): 53–70, at 63.

13. In *Xunzi* chs. 17 and 21, respectively.

14. To this extent I am in agreement with Hagen’s approach to Xunzi’s vision of moral cultivation as a matter of “fulfillment” rather than of transformation from without.

THE PROBLEM WITH EMOTIONS

It is not difficult to see where Xunzi's reputation as a "rationalist" who rejects emotions and desires as morally problematic comes from. This reading can be easily supported by a cursory glance at Xunzi's assertions in chapter 23, "Human Nature Is Bad" (*Xing e* 性惡). Here, Xunzi argues that the inborn nature is bad because it is to this nature that we can attribute those emotions and desires that drive people toward selfish and destructive behavior. As he explains:

Now, people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit in them. If they follow along with this, then struggle and contention will arise, and yielding and deference will perish therein. They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise, and loyalty and trustworthiness will perish therein. They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, and a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise, and ritual and rightness, culture and order, will perish therein. Thus, if people follow along with their inborn natures and dispositions, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up in violence. So, it is necessary to await the transforming influence of teachers and models and the guidance of ritual and rightness, and only then will they come to yielding and deference, turn to culture and order, and end up becoming controled. Looking at it in this way, it is clear that people's nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort.¹⁵

The origins of "badness"—what breaks down, for Xunzi, into contentious, cruel, disorderly, and destructive behavior—lie in certain basic emotions and desires that all people naturally possess. Badness arises from people's "fondness for profit" (*hao li* 好利), their feelings of "hate and dislike" (*ji e* 疾惡), the "desires of their eyes and ears" (*er mu zhi yu* 耳目之欲), and their "fondness for beautiful sights and sounds" (*hao sheng se* 好聲色).

Much of the problem, for Xunzi, seems to be the sheer physicality and spontaneity of human desires. In the same chapter, Xunzi continues his discussion by explaining that human nature is constituted in such a way that it responds physiologically to the world by way of the five sense faculties (*wu guan* 五官). The way that "the eyes like colors, the ears appreciate flavors, the heart appreciates what is of benefit, and the bones and flesh appreciate comfort" arises (*sheng* 生) from the "dispositional nature" (*qing xing* 情性). These forms of responsiveness are unreflective and spontaneous: they are "things that come about of themselves

15. Xunzi ch. 23, HYYX: 86/23/1–5. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 248. *Yi*, left untranslated in Hutton's translation, has been rendered here as "rightness."

upon stimulation (感而自然), things that do not await being worked at (不待事) before being produced.”¹⁶ Given their fundamentally responsive character and their tendency toward sensual pleasure and personal satisfaction, the inborn nature would seem to have no inherent direction toward what is right and proper. Indeed, we might even conceive moral life itself in terms of a struggle between the moral senses and the drives of the body:

What do people's mouths and bellies know of ritual and rightness? What do they know of deference and yielding? What do they know of principled shame and concentrated accumulation of effort? Munching and chomping, the mouth chews. Gurgling and burbling, the belly becomes full. Without a teacher or the proper model, people's hearts are nothing beyond their mouths and bellies.¹⁷

Despite these passages, however, I would suggest that it is neither the *physical* aspect of this human nature nor its connection to the dispositional nature (*qing* 情) as such that accounts for the “badness” of these drives. The problem with the kinds of feelings and desires that impel people to selfishly pursue personal satisfaction, rather than what is good and beneficial to others, lies elsewhere. To get some perspective on the matter, we turn to Xunzi's naturalistic theory, which explains the emotions as phenomena in the larger cosmic order. In chapter 17, “Discourse on Heaven” (*tian lun* 天論), Xunzi explains that there are six emotions given to us by Heaven, or Nature (*tian* 天), and that these constitute the realm of what we might call “natural emotions” (*tian qing* 天情). Consisting of liking (*hao* 好), disliking (*e* 惡), joy (*xi* 喜), anger (*nu* 怒), sadness (*ai* 哀), and delight (*le* 樂),¹⁸ these form part of a constitution that all human beings possess from birth, and that must be properly realized so as to fulfill the potential of “nature's accomplishment” (*tian gong* 天功). These “natural emotions” are part of a host of other natural endowments, including the “natural faculties” (*tian guan* 天官), which are the senses; the “natural ruler” (*tian jun* 天君), which is the mind (*xin* 心); and “the natural nourishment” (*tian yang* 天養), which is a capacity to make use of things that are “not of one's kind.” Collectively, these make up the constitutional endowment of human beings.

Insofar as they are the natural givens of human beings, Heaven-endowed faculties also represent normative constraints that must be abided by in the course of one's life. To go against these them would be a great calamity (*da xiong* 大凶), while to fulfill them would make one a sage (*sheng ren* 聖人):

16. HXYX 87/23/25–27. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 250–251.

17. Xunzi ch. 4, HXYX 11/4/51–52. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 28.

18. Cf. ch. 22, HXYX 87/23/25–27, which lists the same six feelings. For a survey of early Chinese taxonomies of *qing* as the collective category for emotions, see Christoph Harbsmeier, “The Semantics of *Qing*.”

The sage purifies his natural ruler, makes proper his natural faculties, completes his natural nourishment, accords with the natural rule of order, and nurtures his natural emotions, and thereby completes nature's accomplishment. A person who is thus is someone who knows what is his to do and what is not his to do. Then Heaven and Earth will occupy their proper positions and the myriad things will all be servants to him. His conduct will be completely ordered, his nourishment will be completely appropriate, and his life will suffer no harm—this is called knowing Heaven.¹⁹

The “natural feelings,” then, are far from the unruly impulses that Xunzi refers to elsewhere in conjunction with the collective category of *qing*. Here they are presented as human endowments that must be fulfilled.

In an effort to resolve the tension between the account of *qing* given here and the dim view expressed in the “Human Nature Is Bad” chapter, A. C. Graham has conjectured that the term “natural emotions” (*tian qing* 天情), which makes “no reference to the conflicts between the passions,” may be an indication of the early date of this work, not yet tainted by a pessimism that developed in Xunzi “in increasingly desperate times.”²⁰ He has thus speculated that the discrepancy in the attitudes toward *qing* might indicate an evolution in Xunzi's thinking. He further explains that, although there are passages in the *Xunzi* indicating the positive role of *qing* as a source of moral direction, Xunzi's “more usual emphasis is on the anarchy of the passions, which are to be satisfied certainly, but are satisfiable only after we have learned by an arduous moral training to reduce them to order.”²¹ Michael Puett approaches this tension in terms of an “ambivalence” toward emotions stemming ultimately from the rhetorical need to make two distinct assertions needed to justify the traditional rituals handed down from the ancients. That is, Xunzi was committed to the necessity of ancient rituals (for controlling *qing*), but also needed to explain that these rituals were objectively proper (thus according with *qing*).²²

While it is conceivable that Xunzi changed his mind about the normative status of emotions, and certainly the case that Xunzi was confronted with competing theoretical exigencies, there are other ways to resolve the apparent contradiction. If we put aside for a moment the moralizing picture of the unruly, uncontrollable emotions and consider the emotions as part of a naturalistic theory of the human person, we see an important feature of the discussion in chapter 17 that can help to reconcile the two, seemingly disparate accounts. This is the simultaneous assertion that emotions are simply part of our natural endowment and, as such, often go awry, but also that they need to be “nurtured”

19. HXYX 63/17/14–16. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 176–177.

20. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 242.

21. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 242.

22. Puett, “The Ethics of Responding Properly,” 56–58.

if one is to perfect and complete (*quan* 全) the nature we have been endowed with. That emotions and desires, in their ordinary workings, can go awry does not necessarily contradict the possibility that they can exercise a normative pull on us. This is a conception that is fully consistent with the approach of all the other early thinkers examined in this study, but that is given far more theoretical precision in Xunzi's account. Xunzi works with a complex psychological account that admits of *qing* as both raw and spontaneous impulses tending toward personal satisfaction and as a proper source of right action. What unites them is a trajectory of development by which one comes to "nurture" (*yang* 養) one's "natural emotions" as part of one's progress toward personal fulfillment and alignment with the cosmic process.

Xunzi's recognition of emotions and desires as a necessary and proper feature of one's engagement with the world can be seen throughout the text. One of the contexts in which this emerges is Xunzi's various criticisms of Songzi 宋子 (Song Xing) for failing to take the reality of human desires seriously enough. Songzi, Xunzi notes, "saw the value of having few desires but not of having many desires."²³ Like Mencius and the authors of the *Laozi*, Songzi seems to have assumed that people could simply reduce their desires and that the world would be all the better for it. For Xunzi, Songzi's attitude marks a failure to perceive the basic physical and psychological nature of human beings:

Do not people's eyes desire the utmost in sights? Do not people's ears desire the utmost in sounds? Do not people's palates desire the utmost in flavors? Do not people's noses desire the utmost in fragrances? Do not people's bodies desire the utmost in comforts? Do you not also believe people's inborn disposition (情) is to desire these five utmosts?²⁴

In Xunzi's view, Songzi's failure to recognize the power and extent of human desires disqualifies him from making any valid claims about how self-cultivation and social order are to be achieved. For if the inborn nature, with its abundance of desires and emotions, needs to undergo self-cultivation to achieve its moral potential, it is precisely by appealing to these emotions and desires that people can be led to goodness: "If there are few desires and not many desires, the masses cannot be transformed" (*bu hua* 不化).²⁵ And without "transforming" society, there is nothing in the future but chaos and disorder: Songzi's denial of basic human desires cannot "avoid turning utmost order into utmost chaos."²⁶

23. Xunzi ch. 17, HYYX 64/17/52. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 182.

24. Xunzi ch. 18, HYYX 70/18/115–117. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 200.

25. Xunzi ch. 17, HYYX 64/17/53. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 182.

26. Xunzi ch. 18, HYYX 70/18/122. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 200.

Xunzi also objected to Songzi's advocacy of impassivity as a way of responding to challenging situations. In the case of being slighted or insulted by others, Songzi reportedly told people that "being insulted is not disgraceful" (見侮不辱),²⁷ and that they should therefore simply refrain from getting worked up in such incidents. This attempt to neutralize the disruptive impact of negative emotions by a sheer denial of their importance bespoke, for Xunzi, the lack of a sense of "honor" (*rong* 榮) and "disgrace" (*ru* 辱), or right and wrong. Xunzi argued, instead, that when one's honor was violated, it was natural and proper to feel wronged and insulted. In this case, responding emotionally to the insults of others was not immoral or irrational, but simply the natural and appropriate thing to do. To this extent, our emotions could be internal sources of moral knowledge that were structured by an innate sense of right and wrong.

For Xunzi, then, the ideal state, as far as one's emotions are concerned, was not an absence of emotions and desires, but the achievement of an optimal state with respect to one's emotions and desires—a state in which one knew how to properly respond in every situation. The sage was one who knew best how to fulfill his emotional nature: he did not cut himself off from the world to avoid disruptions to his thinking, as did a certain Ji 黻, who would lose his train of thought if "the desires of his eyes and ears were aroused" (*er mu zhi yu jie* 耳目之欲接). Nor was he like Mencius, who threw his wife out of the house for improper behavior. Because these individuals needed to force themselves (*zi qiang* 自彊) to behave properly, Xunzi argued, their situation was precarious (*wei* 危), and they could not be said to have reached the point of "truly thinking" (*wei ji si* 未及思) or of having attained "subtlety" (*wei* 微).²⁸ The sage, Xunzi insisted, did not need to cut himself off from the world of sensual experience or adhere to rigid principles that contravened basic human feelings:

The sage follows his desires (縱其欲) and embraces his feelings (兼其情), but what he establishes on their basis is proper and ordered (*li* 理). What need is there for forcing, for steeling oneself, for precariousness? Thus, a person of humaneness carries out the Dao without striving, and the sage carries out the Dao without forcing himself. The person of *ren* thinks about it with reverence and the sage thinks about it with delight. This is the way to order one's mind.²⁹

As with Confucius and for Mencius, the sage in Xunzi's conception was one who achieved emotional fulfillment and maximized his potential for pleasure *because* he actualized his virtue.

27. Xunzi ch. 18, HXYX 69/18/102. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 197.

28. Xunzi ch. 21, HXYX 81/21/62–65.

29. Xunzi ch. 21, HXYX 81/21/66–67. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 232.

HUMAN INCLINATIONS AND THE TWOFOLD
PARADIGM OF KNOWING

How do we get from our raw emotions and desires, with their “bad” tendencies, to fulfilling ourselves as human beings and completing our human nature? The best-known among Xunzi’s discussions of this subject is the account given in chapter 23, where he compares the inborn nature to a piece of crooked wood that can only be straightened by being steamed and bent straight upon a frame. Xunzi also invokes a comparison with other raw materials such as metal, which must be worked and sharpened upon a grinding stone so that it can become a knife suitable for cutting, and clay, which must be forcibly shaped before it could be made into a useful vessel. In all these cases, it is the conscious exertions of craftsmen that make it possible to transform raw material into useful implements. And so it is with human beings, who can only achieve their human potential through certain artificial interventions. Taken by itself, this comparison of self-cultivation with craft suggests that the inborn nature of human beings is passive—raw material that can be made “good” only if it is molded by an external force.

However, elsewhere in Xunzi’s writings we find other accounts that show a more complicated picture. In the chapter on “Correct Naming” (*Zheng ming* 正名), Xunzi explains that *xing* is “that by which [people] are as they are at birth” (*sheng zhi suo yi ran zhe* 生之所以然者).³⁰ But this inborn nature is not just about a core endowment that human beings are born with. It also encompasses the entire mechanism by which humans interact with their environment—what Xunzi describes as a matter of “stimulus and “response” (*ganying* 感應). As Xunzi puts it, “The close connection of stimulus with response, which requires no effort (*bu shi* 不事) but is so of itself (*zi ran* 然), and which is produced by the harmonious operation of the nature (*xing zhi he suo sheng* 性之和所生), is also called ‘*xing*.’”³¹ As Xunzi explains here, *xing* is both the package of attributes that a person is born with and the entire dynamics or workings of this *xing* in the context of one’s life.

This *xing*, moreover, is not just inchoate matter that is shaped by some higher intelligence or force of change. If the dispositions (*qing*) and desires (*yu* 欲) arise from *xing*, these can also involve the workings of cognition and judgment insofar as they operate on the basis of what is deemed to be right or wrong:

Human nature is the accomplishment of Heaven (*tian zhi jiu* 天之就). The dispositions (*qing* 情) are the substance of the nature (*xing zhi zhi* 性之質). The desires (*yu* 欲) are the responses of the dispositions to things (*qing zhi ying* 情之應). Viewing the objects of desire as permissible to

30. HXYX 83/22/2. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 236.

31. HXYX 83/22/2–3. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 236.

obtain and seeking them are what the dispositions cannot avoid. Deeming something permissible and guiding one are what the understanding must provide. Thus, even were one a gatekeeper, the desires cannot be eliminated, because they are the necessary equipment of the nature (*xing zhi ju* 性之具).³²

Xunzi observes here that “viewing the objects of desire as permissible to obtain and seeking them” is intrinsic to the act of desiring, and that the basis of making such evaluations is the task of understanding (*zhi* 知). And while it is indeed the case, as he notes elsewhere, that the nature is “insufficient to stand on its own and be well-ordered,” and must be “transformed” (*hua* 化),³³ neither the activity of understanding nor the processes that the *xing* undergo through such understanding is exactly “external” to the workings of the nature itself.

For one thing, the cognitive ability also appears to be intrinsic to *xing*. Though Xunzi often specifies that understanding arises from the exercise of the mind (*xin* 心), he also says that the capacity for understanding is a matter of *xing*: “In general, the capacity to know belongs to the inborn nature of human beings (*ren zhi xing* 人之性), and what one can know is the patterned unity of things (*wu zhi li* 物之理).”³⁴ What human beings are innately, then, must also include the reasoned and patterned workings of the mind. *Xing* is thus not only responsible for “unthinking” emotions and desires but also for a certain cognitive ability and a propensity to exercise it.

In his twofold account of the mind in chapter 21 (“Dispelling Fixations,” *Jie bi* 解蔽), Xunzi combines within the faculty of the mind two distinct cognitive processes: rising above one’s immediate situation and viewing things from a higher, all-encompassing perspective; and apprehending things through direct perception and sensory experience. He further describes these two processes by a set of dichotomies: they are one and yet two, they are still and yet in motion. And he deploys striking images to convey these diverse aspects. He thus compares the mind to a pan of water to highlight its ideal condition of clarity (*qing* 清) and brightness (*ming* 明), but also describes it as a kind of magical vessel that “stores things.” The mind, in effect, possesses multiple functions and identities, embodying both emptiness and fullness, movement and stillness:

How does the mind know the Way? I say that it is by its emptiness (*xu* 虛), unity (*yi* 壹), and stillness (*jing* 靜). The mind never stops storing; nonetheless it possesses what is called emptiness. The mind never lacks duality; nonetheless it possesses what is called unity. The mind never stops

32. HYXY 85/22/63–65. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 243–244.

33. HYXY 24/8/109. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 65.

34. HYXY 82/21/78.

moving; nonetheless it possesses what is called stillness. Humans from birth have awareness. Having awareness, there is memory. Memories are what are stored, yet the mind has the property called emptiness. Not allowing what has previously been stored to interfere with what is being received in the mind is called emptiness.³⁵

Because the mind can always remain still, empty, and impartial, it is capable of clear and undistorted perception of the world; but because it is empty, it is always receptive to things and can accumulate experiences.

These two paradigms of the mind reflect two distinct accounts of knowledge: on the one hand, the achievement of a balanced, objective, and broad perspective of things; and on the other, the accumulation of experience (*ji* 積). The idea of knowledge as clear perception emphasizes comprehensive understanding that culminates in knowledge of the “patterned unity of things” (*wu zhi li* 物之理).³⁶ This is to be contrasted with the more limited knowledge of particular things. The difference between the two is the difference between the knowing of “one who is expert in regard to things” (精於物者) and “one who is expert in regard to the Way” (精於道者也): while the former considers only “one thing against another” (*yi wu wu* 以物物), the latter “measures all things together” (*lian wu wu* 兼物物).³⁷

Xunzi’s repeated reference to *zhi dao* 知道, “knowing the Dao,” is connected to the ideal of broad knowing. “Dao” in this context is not a Way in the sense of a correct path for people to follow but, rather, simply the natural course things, as in the early Daoist usage in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Knowing the Dao involves, moreover, not only knowing the world as it is but also knowing oneself—that is, possessing self-awareness in the form of the ability understand the workings of one’s own mind (*xin* 心). It is this self-awareness and the ability to recognize the limits of one’s own perceptions that make knowledge of “things as they are” possible:

The sage knows the problems in the workings of the mind (*xin shu zhi huan* 心術之患), and sees the disaster of being fixated and blocked up in one’s thinking (*jian bi sai zhi huo* 見蔽塞之禍). Thus, he is neither for desires (*wu yu* 無欲), nor for dislikes (*wu wu* 無惡), is neither for the origins, nor for the end results, is neither for what is near, nor for what is far away, is neither for what is broad, nor for what is shallow, is neither for the ancient past, nor is for the present. He lays out all the myriad things

35. HXYX 80/21/34–37. Xunzi, trans. Knoblock, 21.8.

36. HXYX 82/21/79.

37. HXYX 80/21/51–52. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 230. Cf. the preceding paragraph, where Xunzi refers to the ideal of knowing whereby “the myriad things can all be known together” (*wan wu ke lian zhi ye* 萬物可兼知也).

and in their midst suspends his scales. For this reason, the various different things are unable to become fixating and so disorder his categories of judgment.³⁸

Possessing self-awareness of one's own mind, the sage is aware of the various ways its proper functioning could be impeded, and of how these impairments could be overcome. This grants him the ability to "lay out the myriad things" and "suspend his scales" (*heng* 衡)—the perfect balance of the scale being an image of the Dao itself.

Within this epistemological paradigm, knowledge is in potential conflict with feelings and desires. Xunzi lists "desires" (*yu* 欲) and "dislikes" (*e* 惡) among the various "fixations" (*bi* 蔽) that interfere with the attainment of true knowledge. He gives historical examples of people whose fixations inhibited their ability to perceive things properly and, thus, to act appropriately: the fixation of past rulers with concubines and close ministers prevented them from recognizing (*zhi* 知) men of worth, while the fixations of certain ministers with achieving power blocked their ability to forecast the consequences of their actions. Past thinkers, too, were blocked in their perception by their own particular fixations:

Mozi was fixated on the useful (*bi yu yong* 蔽於用) and did not understand the value of good form (*bu zhi wen* 不知文). Song Xing was fixated on desire (*bi yu* 蔽於欲) and did not understand the value of achieving satisfaction (*bu zhi de* 不知得). Shen Dao was fixated on laws (*bi yu fa* 蔽於法) and did not understand the value of having worthy people (*bu zhi xian* 不知賢). Shen Buhai was fixated on power (*bi yu yi* 蔽於勢) and did not understand the value of having wise people (*bu zhi zhi* 不知知). Huizi 惠子 was fixated on words (*bi yu ci* 蔽於辭) and did not understand the value of what was substantial (*bu zhi shi* 不知實). Zhuangzi was fixated on Heaven (*bi yu tian* 蔽於天) and did not understand the value of the human (*bu zhi ren* 不知人).³⁹

The paradigm of knowledge as comprehensive and balanced perception suggests a kind of objectivity achieved through one's ability to detach oneself sufficiently from the particularities of one's situation so as to have mastery over one's emotions and desires, but not necessarily to transcend them. This is what Lee Yearley has referred to as Xunzi's notion of the "mind as spectator," according to which the mind "can view with detachment the emotions

38. HXYX 79/21/28–29. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 227.

39. HXYX 79/21/21–22. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 226–227. The translation of the term *tian* 天 has been modified from "Nature" to "Heaven" for consistency with my discussion of Zhuangzi in the previous chapter.

generated by desire” without having to eradicate the desires altogether.⁴⁰ Thus, if emotions and desires could be problematic, they are not necessarily so, since the mind’s capacity for knowledge enables it to engage with them and arrive at the proper course of action. Among other things, the mind is capable of deliberation (*lu* 慮), which Xunzi explains as “when there is a certain emotion and the mind chooses on its behalf” (情然而心為之擇謂之慮). Building upon this idea, he explains *wei*, or conscious effort, as “when the mind deliberates and one’s abilities move on its behalf,” and also, “what comes into being through accumulated reflection (*lu ze* 慮積) and the training of one’s abilities.”⁴¹ In defining deliberation as a matter of the mind making a choice on behalf of emotions, Xunzi asserts the independence of the cognitive faculty, but also assumes its cooperation with the emotions. He also links “conscious effort” with deliberation, indicating that the efforts that give rise to goodness in human life require the involvement of knowledge and judgment. Instead of a dichotomous theoretical model of *xing* versus *wei*, feeling versus thought, internality versus externality, we have a model of practical self-realization that shows how the innate nature and conscious effort, feeling and deliberation, should ideally work in tandem.

The other paradigm of knowledge as “accumulation” (*ji* 積) refers to a gradual and cumulative process based on direct, sensory engagement with the world.⁴² This type of knowing stresses the role of practice and repeated effort in the endeavor to cultivate oneself. In chapter 1, “Exhortation to Learning” (*quan xue* 勸學), Xunzi compares the process of learning to accumulating earth to form a mountain, which gives rise to wind and rain, and to accumulating water to form a deep pool, which “produces dragons.” Similarly, he speaks of virtue (*de* 德) in terms of an accumulation of goodness (*ji shan* 積善) that naturally leads to the achievement of “spiritual intelligence” (*shen ming* 神明).⁴³ This is a vision of self-realization that depends on gradual and cumulative effort: “without accumulating steps there is no way to travel a thousand *li*; without accumulating small streams, there is no way to form a river or sea.” Cultivating oneself to become a sage is, in this sense, no different from training oneself to become a farmer, a craftsman, or a merchant. Attainment of any sort is to be understood as a matter of “accumulating experience”:

40. As Yearley explains, this position was Xunzi’s rejoinder to the Daoistic/extreme ascetic position that desires had to be eradicated. Yearley also refers to a paradigm of the “mind as director,” which was meant to counter the other major position of the day—the “extreme-self-cultivationist position”—which argued that desires were infinitely malleable. Yearley reads Xunzi’s twofold model of the mind as part of a synthesis of the perspectives of Mencius and Zhuangzi stemming from his position that one could be “at once detached from the world and active in it.” Lee Yearley, “Hsun Tzu on the Mind: His Attempted Synthesis of Confucianism and Taoism,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (1980): 465–480, on 473.

41. HXY 83/22/2–4.

42. David Nivison has persuasively shown that, despite the resemblance of the balanced objective knowledge of the sage to Daoist knowing, Xunzi’s vision does not signify an ideal of detachment. David S. Nivison, “Xunzi and Zhuangzi.”

43. HXY 2/1/18.

If people accumulate experience in weeding and plowing, they become farmers. If they accumulate experience in chopping and carving, they become craftsmen. If they accumulate experience in selling and vending, they become merchants. If they accumulate experience in ritual and rightness, they become gentlemen. . . . This is not because of their Heaven-given nature, but rather because accumulation and polishing have made it so. Hence, if people know to be diligent about practice, be careful about habituation, and esteem accumulation and polishing, then they become gentlemen.⁴⁴

Conceived in this way, the path to sagehood becomes one in which emotions and desires are more than forces that need to be controlled, directed, and mastered: as the very basis of human motivation and experience, they play an active and determinative role in moral life. That is, it is not simply a matter of reason overcoming desire, but of committing to one type of desire over another. Lee Yearley has argued that the choice ultimately comes down to a preference for “long-range desires,” which broadly considers one’s needs over “short-range and narrowly selfish desires.”⁴⁵ It also meets an important criterion of virtue for Xunzi: that it be spontaneous and motivated from within, and not imposed from without. When an imaginary interlocutor asks Xunzi why all people do not become sages even though all are able to “accumulate” the proper forms of experience, he answers that only those who have the will to achieve moral perfection can actually succeed. They cannot be made (*shi* 使) to perfect themselves.⁴⁶

I say, they can do it, but they *cannot be made* (*shi* 使) to do it. Thus, the petty man can become a gentleman, but *is not willing* (不肯為) to become a gentleman (*junzi* 君子). The gentleman can become a petty man, but *is not willing* to become a petty man. It has never been that the petty man and gentleman are incapable of becoming each other. However, the reason they do not become each other is that, they can do so but *cannot be made to do so*. Thus, it is the case that anyone on the streets can become a Yu, but it is not necessarily the case that anyone on the streets will be able to become a Yu. Even if one is not able to become a Yu, this does not compromise the fact that one could become a Yu.⁴⁷

This passage stresses that foundational to the entire process of self-cultivation is motivation, without which a person cannot be changed and developed in any

44. Xunzi ch. 8, HXYX 25/8/114–116. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 66.

45. Yearley, “Hsün Tzu on the Mind,” 466.

46. Xunzi uses the expression “cannot be forced” (不可使) on a number of occasions to describe virtuous people who are not willing to commit acts of treachery even upon threat of death. See, e.g., HXYX 18/7/22 and 55/15/51–42.

47. Italics added. Xunzi ch. 23, HXYX 89/23/70–73. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 254–255.

way. This motivation, though undoubtedly complemented by the aesthetic appeal of beautiful and correct forms of cultural practice, also arises from the inner workings and propensities of human nature and the mind.

MORAL MOTIVATION AND THE DRIVE TO FULFILLMENT

For Xunzi, then, the pursuit of goodness is a drive that has to come from within: one cannot simply be *made* good. The question is where this motivation comes from, and an important part of the answer is that it derives from certain tendencies and propensities within human beings—in particular, from an inclination toward higher understanding and the fulfillment of one's inherent nature. What this entails is intimated in Xunzi's twofold account of the mind, which stresses one's ability to stand outside of one's immediate perspective and grasp the higher order of things, while also being fully immanent in one's experiences and perceptions. Xunzi's recognition of the mind's capacity for higher awareness points to an innate capacity in humans to see themselves in relation to truths, norms, and ideals that they have not yet actualized, and to motivate themselves to achieve and fulfill their human potential to achieve them. It also points to an ability to produce the means that could help them achieve them—rituals, norms, institutions, and cultural forms that are, in some sense, “external,” but are produced by the deliberating human mind. All this suggests that the motivation for virtue arises both from one's innate capacity for insight into the true nature of things and from one's openness to change from the outside world. This offers a very different set of possibilities from the usual accounts of Xunzi's ethics, which tend to approach morality as “objective” guidelines derived from sources outside oneself.

This context brings added significance to an intriguing psychological explanation that Xunzi gives to account for the human pursuit of virtue. Xunzi claims that human beings possess a basic desire to overcome the deficiencies of their own nature. This is not a natural inclination to become good per se, but to pursue what one feels to be lacking. Thus, those who are ugly desire (*yuan* 願) beauty, those who are base desire nobility, those who are poor desire wealth, and so on. The principle, Xunzi concludes, is this: “What one does not possess within, one will certainly seek outside” (苟無之中者, 必求於外). Conversely, “What one possesses within oneself, one will certainly not pursue outside” (苟有之中者, 必不及於外).⁴⁸ This psychology explains the human desire for goodness: “That people desire to become good is because their natures are bad.”⁴⁹ Since the innate nature of human beings lacks ritual and rightness, people must “force themselves

48. HXYX 88/23/33.

49. HXYX 88/23/34.

to engage in learning” (*qiang xue* 彊學) so as to possess them. And since their innate natures do not know (*bu zhi* 不知) ritual and rightness, they must “reflect and think” (*si lu* 思慮), and thereby endeavor to know them.⁵⁰

As Xunzi explains it, the desire for goodness is an instance of human beings’ drive to overcome their incompleteness. Badness in human nature, Xunzi argues, drives a pursuit of goodness. Ugliness drives a pursuit of beauty. What motivates human beings, then, is not simply external forces that mold and shape their actions, but a certain ideal vision of completeness. Both the recognition of one’s incompleteness and the drive to overcome it are natural to human beings as part of their innate constitution. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the quest for completeness is not completely amoral; it is not just desire for what one does not have, but a desire for the good. Xunzi does not suggest, for example, that people who lack ugliness would desire to possess it, or that people who lack badness would desire that. He assumes that there is something of objective value in certain things—beauty, virtue, and so on—and that human beings can appreciate this value. There are, in effect, certain natural, internal constraints that contribute to the pursuit of moral goodness.

This places Xunzi’s statement about the “badness” of the inborn nature in a different light. It suggests that, if the inborn nature is inclined to act against what is good on account of certain emotive tendencies, it does not necessarily mean that the inborn nature itself consists of nothing but these feelings and desires, or that its tendencies are inherently incompatible with virtue. With their capacity for knowledge, human beings become conscious of their incompleteness and are able to devise ways to overcome it. Since the capacity for knowledge and reflection are intrinsic features of the inborn nature, goodness cannot be a matter of reason overcoming desire, or of acquired norms overcoming innate endowments. The human capacity for knowledge and awareness drives a desire to pursue, appreciate, and ultimately achieve those qualities that enable human beings to “complete” (*quan* 全) themselves. Humans are not as malleable as lumps of clay or as deformed as warped wood that must be steamed and bent to be straight. They possess a will to fulfillment that motivates them to pursue the good.

As for the other paradigm of knowledge, which stresses the accumulation of experience, it corresponds to a more long-term, dedicated process of self-cultivation that engages not only the intellect but also the body and emotions. Thus, it involves learning (*xue* 學) that “begins with the recitation of the classics and ends with the study of ritual,”⁵¹ but that also requires the cultivation of one’s emotional dispositions so as to transform what and how one desires. In this case, the motivation for the pursuit of what is good is fostered through an elaborate

50. HXYX 88/23/34.

51. HXYX 2/1/26.

process whereby raw emotions are worked and refined through deliberate, reasoned, and orderly activity. This is a process in which ritual and music play a crucial role. These are cultural forms created by the ancients to ensure the proper fulfillment of people's emotions. As Xunzi explains in the case of ritual: "Know well that ritual (*li* 禮), rightness (*yi* 義), form (*wen* 文) and proper order (*li* 理 are the way to nurture to one's emotions (*yang qing* 養情)."⁵²

But what actually happens in this process of "nurturing the emotions" is a complicated issue: does ritual "transform" (*hua* 化) one's emotional disposition, or does it simply channel or refine them? How can people nurture their emotions in such a way that they not only do the right thing but also do so willingly and joyously? Many recent scholars have argued against the idea that Xunzi was claiming it was necessary to transform the inborn nature, but have still generally accepted that moral direction comes from something external to what we might call "the feeling themselves." According to David Wong, when one comes to "love and delight in morality," it is because this morality "expresses, channels, and strengthens some of our natural human feelings." That is, human beings, by their nature, possess certain emotions that are "congenial to morality" even if these feelings are not, strictly speaking, moral.⁵³ Wong assumes that human nature contains both morally positive and negative emotions: those oriented toward concern for others (e.g., love for one's parents) and those that are essentially selfish. Self-cultivation would thus involve taking those feelings that are compatible with morality and "moralizing" them so that they lead to moral conduct.

An alternative way of thinking about how innate dispositions could be reconciled with "external" forms of morality is in terms of a kind of balance between cognitively derived judgments and the inborn dispositions. Both T. C. Kline and Kurtis Hagen assume that as a result of the self's engagement with proper ritual and norms, one develops a more intelligent, rationally disposed set of dispositions that help to counterbalance the raw desires. According to Kline, the need to satisfy both the demands of our own desires and those of the ritual order call for the "habituation of new dispositions." This involves undergoing a "therapy of desire" that calls not for the eradication of feelings and desires, as Martha Nussbaum has stressed for the Hellenistic traditions, but the formation of "different desires with new objects."⁵⁴ The goal of this therapy is to achieve a harmony between the two sources of motivation that reside within us: judgments of "approval" and "disapproval" arising from the cognitive capacity of our mind, on

52. HXYX 70/19/13.

53. Wong, "Xunzi on Moral Motivation," 150.

54. Kline, "Therapy of Desire, 235–246. For a contrasting reading of Xunzi as advocating a moderation of desires, see Kim-Chong Chong, *Early Confucian Ethics* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2007). Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the one hand, and the desires arising from our dispositions, on the other. Kline stresses that, throughout this process, *xing* itself does not change. Kurtis Hagen similarly stresses that *xing* as such does not undergo any fundamental change in Xunzi's view and that Xunzi's idea of "nurturing" (*yang*) one's emotions is about "developing new motivational dispositions" that do not result in a change in one's innate desires but lead to "intelligently derived additions to it."⁵⁵

Such accounts of self-cultivation, in which one brings out and develops morally disposed feelings, creates new forms of desire or else adds intelligent content to existing ones, suggest that what is involved is ultimately a kind of balancing act within the self. There is, in effect, a compromise between natural dispositions and desires, on the one hand, and intelligence, norms, and moral judgments, on the other. Philip Ivanhoe places this balancing idea front and center in his reading of Xunzi's moral vision when he writes of the "happy symmetry" between the needs and desires of human beings and the realities of the world at large. The need to properly balance the two was, he explains, what led to the creation of the rites, which were "the only means for restraining and training our fundamentally bad nature" and could also "provide for universal harmony and the common flourishing of heaven, earth and human beings."⁵⁶

What these readings bring out is the importance of cognition and judgment in Xunzi's account of the sources of moral motivation. It is, indeed, through the thinking faculty of the mind that one comes to develop feelings and desires that are in line with one's intelligent and proper goals. However, the idea that intelligence and reason counterbalance the raw feelings through the creation of more "intelligent" feelings presupposes that emotive and cognitive processes are fundamentally distinct and need to be pushed together in various ways. I argue, rather, that the pursuit of goodness is part of a more general drive toward completion and satisfaction, and that this pursuit both shapes the workings of higher intelligence and comprises the standard of fulfillment of one's emotions and desires.

GIVING FORM TO WHAT IS "WITHOUT SHAPE OR
SHADOW": RITUAL, MUSIC, AND THE UNFOLDING
OF EMOTIONAL LIFE

For Xunzi, the sources of moral direction are both cognitive and emotive in the sense that the motivation to pursue the good is embedded in both the workings of the mind and the drive to achieve the optimal form of one's emotions and desires. The importance of achieving such optimal realization can be seen in

55. Hagen, "Xunzi and the Prudence of *Dao*," 66–67.

56. Philip J. Ivanhoe, "A Happy Symmetry: Xunzi's Ethical Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1991): 309–322.

Xunzi's extensive discussion of ritual and music. Xunzi's understanding of how rituals and emotions are connected can be noted in the following passage:

Ritual begins with coarseness, is brought to fulfillment with proper form, and culminates in delight and beauty. Ritual reaches its highest perfection (*zhi bei* 至備) when both emotions (*qing* 情) and form (*wen* 文) are fully realized (*ju jin* 俱盡). Then comes that in which emotions and form in turn prevail. Finally, there is that in which one reverts to emotions alone so as to return to the great undifferentiated whole.⁵⁷

The task of nurturing the emotions through “external” tools such as ritual and music thus amounts to more than the shaping of emotions and desires through the rational mind. It is that, through the proper deployment of ritual (as well as music), both emotions (*qing* 情) and form (*wen* 文) achieve their perfected state (*zhi bei* 至備) and their optimal condition of fulfillment.

In the account that Xunzi gives to explain how these forms, or *wen*, affect the individual, he invokes the idea of a “transformation” (*hua* 化) taking in within the person, suggesting that self-cultivation is a matter of shaping human nature through forces external to the self:

Sounds and music enter (*ru* 入) deeply into people and transform them (*hua ren* 化人) quickly. Therefore, the ancient kings were assiduous in creating proper forms. If music is balanced and peaceful, the people will be harmonious and not given to dissipation. If it is solemn and dignified, the people will behave in a uniform manner and will not be inclined to disorder. . . . If music is dissolute and seduces towards wickedness, then the people will become dissipated and indolent and will be mean-spirited and base.⁵⁸

This passage describes how certain rituals surrounding musical activity (including both singing and dancing) can “transform people” (*hua ren* 化人) by producing certain emotions. Thus, donning robes of mourning and hearing the sounds of weeping “cause the heart to be sad” (使人之心悲) while putting on military gear and lining up in formation “cause the heart to be roused” (使人之心傷).⁵⁹ Such an emphasis on music's ability to affect people's emotions implies a rather passive picture of the self, in which particular human emotions and desires are actually caused (*shi* 使) by the presence of musical forms that are conducive to them.

However there are, again, complications. First, in the above passage, despite the fact that Xunzi speaks of music “entering” (*ru* 入) and “transforming” (*hua* 化) people, when it comes to explaining the mechanism by which such change

57. Xunzi ch. 19, HYYX 71/19/25–26. Adapted from Xunzi, trans. Knoblock, 19.2c, 60.

58. Xunzi ch. 20, HYYX 76/20/15–77/20/18.

59. Xunzi ch. 20, HYYX 77/20/24–25.

in people comes about, he resorts to a theory of stimulus and response (*ganying* 感應), and not one of internalization. The conceptual context of this is one of a system of interconnected *qi* 氣, or psycho-physical force, in which an event in the world causes a corresponding *qi* in the individual to respond:

When wanton sounds (*jian sheng* 姦聲) stir (*gan* 感) a person, a perverse *qi* (逆氣) responds (*ying* 應) to them from within. When this perverse *qi* takes form (*cheng xiang* 成象), then disorder arises (*sheng* 生) from it. But when proper sounds (*zheng sheng* 正聲) arouse a person, a compliant *qi* (順氣) responds to them from within. When this compliant *qi* takes form, then good order results from it. Those singing the lead and those chiming in match each other, and goodness and badness in people both resemble this. Therefore, the gentleman is careful about what he rejects and what he draws near to.⁶⁰

What this suggests is that when a person hears good or bad music and responds with proper or improper feelings, what takes place is not a “transformation” in the sense that one’s basic physical constitution changes but, rather, a stimulation of different types of *qi* within the self by different things in the environment. The result is a change in the overall balance of the individual represented by different types of emotions coming to the fore.

For Xunzi, then, the self is a composite of multiple, simultaneous possibilities. There exist, at any given moment, a number of potential emotional responses, and depending on the nature of the external stimulus, one might trigger a “perverse” potential within oneself or a “compliant” one. It is because of these multiple possibilities that one needs to possess intelligent awareness of oneself and things—of one’s needs and desires, as well as the means to satisfy them. This is what enables a person to opt for the proper course of action, which for Xunzi represents the path to human fulfillment. How this works is elaborated in great detail in his discussion of the standard funerary rites. In his endeavor to justify the rituals of ornamenting the dead and gradually distancing them from the living, he describes how each stage of the ritual helps to bring about the appropriate emotions and guard against the more spontaneous but less proper ones that would arise in the absence of ritual:

The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentation, one moves the corpse gradually further away, and over a long time one gradually returns to one’s regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust (*e* 惡) at them,

60. Xunzi ch. 20, HYYX 77/20/26–28. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 220.

and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel grief (*ai* 哀). If one keeps them close, then one will become casual with them, and if one becomes casual with them, then one will grow tired of them. If one grows tired of them, then one will become indifferent, and if one is indifferent, then one will not be respectful (*jing* 敬). If one day a person loses his lord or father, but in his manner in sending them off to be buried shows neither grief nor respect, then he is close to being a beast. The gentleman would be ashamed to do such a thing, so the reason that he changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentation is to eliminate any disgust. The reason that he moves the corpse gradually further away is to pursue respectfulness. The reason that only over a long time does he gradually return to his regular routine is to properly adjust his life.⁶¹

Two important assumptions emerge from this account. First, there exists, for Xunzi, a set of proper emotional responses in the situation he describes: grief and respect. Second, in the absence of proper ritual, a number of competing spontaneous emotions may emerge, and the proper emotion may be overpowered by more immediate reactions. That is, the feeling of disgust (*e* 惡) at the sight of the exposed body—which Mencius had described in terms of the more overwhelming feeling of horror—does not, in itself, harmonize with grief and naturally bring about remorse and compassion toward one's deceased parents, eventually leading to their proper burial. Instead, it blocks or overpowers the proper emotional response, which is that of sadness (*ai* 哀). Moreover, without the proper ritual distance, the presence of the dead body brings about familiarity, which diminishes the feeling of respect (*jing* 敬) toward the deceased. The difference here between disgust and grief, and between indifference and respect, is the difference between the proper emotions invoked by the intelligent use of ritual and the improper emotions arising from circumstances left to unfold on their own.

Ritual's function to separate and distinguish enables the proper fulfillment of human emotions. Ritual is used to distinguish among different levels and categories of people and things: noble and commoner, ruler and subject, father and son, human and animal. It is also a means of demarcating time into increments, allowing the course of human life to move forward without stagnation. This is most important when it comes to separating ourselves from our deceased loved ones; periods of grief, necessary as they are, must eventually come to an end. Although the feelings of sorrow and remembrance undoubtedly continue, the ritual of mourning must be cut off. "Surely," Xunzi explains, "this is in order that there may be a proper stopping point for sending off the dead and proper regulation for resuming one's normal life, is it not?"⁶² Ultimately, it is because

61. Xunzi ch. 19, HYYX 73/19/60–63. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 209.

62. Xunzi ch. 19, HYYX 74/19/96–97. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 213.

Xunzi sees, in each situation, multiple possibilities of being and responsiveness, that ritual and music are of such vital importance. They are what enable the proper emotions to emerge in a given situation, ensuring that the needs of life can be carried on.

The other way in which ritual and music are necessary for the proper unfolding of emotional life is that they make possible the channeling and optimal expression of human feelings through patterned form (*wen* 文). Xunzi emphasizes this aspect in his discussion of music: playing upon the visual pun between the term for music (*yue* 樂) and the term for joy (*le* 樂), Xunzi explains that music is the form given to joy, which is a basic emotion that cannot but be expressed:

Music is joy. It is an unavoidable part of the emotional disposition of human beings (*ren qing* 人情). Thus, people cannot be without music. If they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape (*xing* 形) in movement (*dong jing* 動靜). The way of human beings is such that changes in the motions of their nature are completely contained in these sounds and movements. So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape, but if it takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos.⁶³

Emerging spontaneously from people's feelings, music is a universal and vital part of human life. It is thus important not only as a vehicle for evoking certain kinds of emotions but also as a necessary mode of emotional expression. Crucial to this expression, however, is the form: Xunzi claims that people must have music because they invariably possess certain kinds of feelings that need to take form: "people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape." This is more than a theory of artistic forms as a representation or expression of the inner state. It is a claim that one cannot properly experience one's emotions without their concretization through form—in this case, the forms of music and dance.

The same is true for ritual: by giving patterned form to feelings—particularly those deep and painful feelings of grief and sorrow—ritual ensures their proper release and expression. Ritual "gives visible shape to that which is without shape or shadow" and, through this proper expression, makes possible their satisfaction and fulfillment:

If they are repressed (*an qu ran yi* 案屈然已), the emotions stirred by remembrance of the dead (*zhi yi zhi qing* 志意之情) will be frustrated and remain unexpressed, and the rituals in dealing with such matters will seem lacking and incomplete. Thus, the former kings acted so as to establish

63. Xunzi ch. 20, HYYX 76/20/1–3. Xunzi, trans. Hutton, 218.

proper forms through which people could fully express their commitment to honor those deserving honor (*zun zun* 尊尊), and to show affection to those whom they cherished (*qin qin* 親親).⁶⁴

Xunzi appears, then, to present at least two different accounts of how ritual and music work to shape the emotions: first, by creating the circumstances that give rise to the emergence of proper emotions and desires; and second, by giving them the shape and form that will enable their optimal fulfillment, thereby serving life and its full realization. These accounts point to two important features of his vision of self-cultivation: first, that while it proceeds through engagement with things in the external world, it is not a matter of things transforming the individual but, rather, of a movement toward optimal fulfillment—be it through the deployment of right understanding, the creation of sacred ritual spaces outside of ordinary life, or a long process of habituation.⁶⁵ Second, the process is very much a physical one insofar as one's ethical realization as a human being is fully manifest in one's body. As Xunzi puts it, the learning (*xue* 學) of the *junzi* radiates through his entire body: it “enters through his ears, fastens through his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions.”⁶⁶ Both these features reveal a more general account of moral perfection as one in which the individual, in moving towards the fulfillment of her human potentiality, comes to achieve alignment with the patterns and processes of the cosmos.

CONCLUSION

Xunzi has long been identified with a rather stark moral stance that rejects the emotions as inimical to moral life and as thus needing to be tamed and directed by an intelligent, reasoning faculty that lies outside the innate nature. As I have proposed, this conclusion is largely based on the claims he makes in the “Human Nature Is Bad” chapter, without consideration of important discussions elsewhere in his writings, in which he also specified that the inborn nature was not simply the bundle of raw and wayward impulses and desires but also encompassed the human capacity for knowledge and a tendency to seek and appreciate fulfillment. As with other mainstream thinkers with whom his views are often opposed, Xunzi embraced a vision of the perfected life that involved the optimal fulfillment of human potential. This model of fulfillment pervaded Xunzi's thinking more generally, and represented a criterion of value that extended to all areas of ethical concern. The importance of such fulfillment for Xunzi can be discerned

64. *Xunzi* ch. 19, HXYX 75/19/119–120. *Xunzi*, trans. Knoblock, 19.11, 72.

65. As Xunzi writes in ch. 8, “Human nature is something I cannot remake, but it can be transformed. The dispositions are something I do not have complete grasp of, but they can be remade. Practice and habituation are the means to transform human nature.” HXYX 24/8/108–25 to 25/8/110. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 65.

66. HXYX 2/1/31. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 5.

in the prevalence in his writings of such terms as *zhi* 至 *bei* 備, *ju* 俱, *jin* 盡, and *quan* 全—all of which convey ideals of perfection, realization, and completion. This general priority is encapsulated in Xunzi's observation that "The gentleman knows that whatever is imperfect (*bu quan* 不全) and unrefined (*bu cui* 不粹) does not receive praise."⁶⁷

The process of attaining moral completion was not, strictly speaking, due to the application of external force, but was, rather, the optimal playing out of certain intrinsic features of human nature, which included a cognitive capacity to grasp the "underlying pattern of things" and to bring this pattern to bear upon one's person. Moreover, Xunzi was explicit in stating that this was not about maximizing pleasure or self-interest: if such consequences did result, it was most fortuitous, since the sage, as Xunzi described him, "follows his desires and embraces his feelings, but what he establishes on their basis is proper and ordered."⁶⁸ The goals of fulfilling one's nature and of satisfying one's desires were conceptually distinct, even if the two could often be realized together. As he observed in his "Correct Naming" (*zheng ming* 正名, ch. 22), lamentable was the fate of those who, "wishing to nurture their desires, indulge their emotions" (縱其情); who, "wishing to nurture their nature, endanger their bodies" (危其形); who, "wishing to nurture their pleasures, attack the mind" (攻其心); and who, "wishing to nurture their reputation, bring disorder to their conduct" (亂其行).⁶⁹

In the end, the self in Xunzi's ethical vision was a composite of multiple forces and inclinations that often competed with one another, but that, when properly realized, achieved harmony and fulfillment. This optimal state was one in which the mind/heart was in alignment with the underlying pattern of things (*li* 理). Having attained this state, whether one had many desires or few mattered not at all: "If what the mind/heart approves of resides within the proper patterns, then even if the desires are many, what harm would they be to good order? . . . If what the mind/heart approves of misses the proper patterns, then even if the desires are few, how would it stop short of chaos?"⁷⁰ Although it is clear from this passage that Xunzi did not regard the satisfaction of desires as furnishing the criterion of moral fulfillment, it also shows that right judgment arose from the exercise of the mind in such a way as to bring about the fulfillment of human potentiality. Attaining such a state brought not only happiness and satisfaction but also mastery of one's circumstances:

If one's heart is peaceful and happy, then even if the sights are inferior to what is simply plain, they are still enough to nourish the eyes. Even if the

67. HXYX 3/1/46. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 8.

68. *Xunzi* ch. 21, HXYX 81/21/66–67. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 232.

69. HXYX 86/22/82–84. *Xunzi*, trans. Knoblock, 22.16.

70. HXYX 85/22/60–62. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 244. Elsewhere, Xunzi states that the standard is the Way: "The Way is the correct balance from ancient times to the present. If one departs from the Way and instead, looking within, chooses based on himself alone, then he will not know to what disaster and good fortune are attached." HXYX 86/22/74. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 245.

sounds are inferior to what is simply plain, they are enough to nourish the ears. Greens for food and vegetable stew are still enough to nourish the palate. Clothes made from coarse cloth and shoes made with coarse thread are still enough to nourish one's body. A thatched hut or storehouse for one's home and dwelling, dried reeds for one's bedding, and at most a single low table and mat are still enough to nourish one's physical form. Thus, even while lacking the finest of the myriad things, one can still nourish one's joy and even while lacking a position of power and eminence, one can still nourish one's fame. If one takes a person like this and gives him the whole empire in addition, his actions on behalf of all under Heaven will be numerous, while his pursuits of his own individual joy will be few. This is called valuing oneself and making things one's servants (*zhong ji yi wu* 重己役物).⁷¹

Perfecting one's potential as a human being enabled one to make "servants" of things and to achieve control over one's life and one's destiny. This was the true meaning of power and the ultimate path to realizing one's agency in the world.

71. HXYX 86/22/84–88. *Xunzi*, trans. Hutton, 246.

Conclusion

This book has been an attempt to make sense of a basic, and widely recognized, aspect of traditional Chinese moral culture, which is its emphasis on intuition, emotional attunement, and spontaneous responsiveness as the defining qualities of a sagely individual. As far as we know, this cluster of values was first explicitly articulated around the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, when thinkers began to theorize about the workings of the human body and psyche, and about how such workings pertained to moral and political life. While some argued that human emotions and desires were passive, “unthinking” and involuntary responses to things and events in the world, others proposed that the realm of emotions worked in tandem with proper thinking and judgment, and even manifested the moral agency of the fully realized individual. It was the latter position that would eventually become mainstream in the Chinese philosophical tradition, dramatically shaping the thought, culture and values of imperial China. My goal in this project has been to reconstruct the contours of this vision of emotions and to explain how and why it came about.

The importance of the “emotive” in traditional Chinese ethics has been a recurring refrain in studies of Chinese philosophy, literature, and art. However, the issues of why such an emphasis emerged in the first place and what its significance might have been have not received much scrutiny. Most of the scholarship on emotions in the context of early Chinese philosophy has been devoted to tracing and analyzing the normative pronouncements about them found in early texts—that is, to establishing whether a given thinker thought that the emotions were good or bad, correct or deviant, and whether their views were consistent—and to showing how the emotions were implicated in core moral-psychological categories such as *qing*, *xin*, and *xing*. More ambitiously, some recent studies have engaged the problem of emotions as part of larger historical narratives that situate shifts in affective norms within a broader history of political development (Yuri Pines), as an element within a particular moment or style of intellectual and cultural synthesis (Nathan Sivin), or as part of a more conceptual analysis that focuses on the dynamics of metaphor analysis (Edward Slingerland). However, the development of early thinking about emotions, within the evolving nexus of

ideas about both nature and normativity, have not been the primary focus of any major historical study.

The approach I have taken here seeks to more thoroughly interrogate the ethical and conceptual dimensions of early thinking about emotions, while situating the discourse of emotions within a more historically engaged narrative. Beginning with a picture of what the early mainstream thinkers thought the emotions were, I have argued that their concern with emotions was part of a complex of intertwined histories—histories in which the ideas and affective norms arising from the mainstream vision of emotions gave rise to distinct ways of envisioning the self, the cosmos, and the political order. Through such an approach, I have tried to probe what the emotions meant for these early thinkers, and to understand how and why what we might call the emotive dimensions of human life came to attain the normative authority that it did in traditional China.

According to the mainstream conception, the emotions represented the essential, underlying dispositional nature of human beings. They were not disturbances or states of arousal that signaled a person's deviation from some neutral, non-emotive condition, as some interpreters would have it; instead, they represented certain inherent propensities and inclinations that were essential to the very constitution and nature of a person. As exemplified by the ontologically ambiguous concept of *qing*, the emotions were the patterned dispositions that all people possessed in common and that, if properly realized, were in alignment with the patterns of the natural world. It was in this sense that emotions and desires were not simply "subjective" phenomena but were also fundamentally bound up with "reality."

It was not a foregone conclusion in the Warring States period that such an account would come to hold sway. For one thing, there were other contenders. As traced in earlier chapters, the mainstream philosophers were engaged in open disputation with thinkers who espoused quite different views on the matter—views that are of particular interest to us because they resemble the modern psychological theories of emotions that have currency in our own day, with their materialist and constructivist premises. These thinkers proposed, for instance, that emotions are passive, involuntary responses to things in the world; that they signal the self's lack of a sustained identity and unity; and that they are malleable features of a person's makeup, to be shaped and molded by political and cultural institutions. Some also proposed that emotions and desires were disturbances to one's nature that should be eliminated.

In stark contrast to such claims, the mainstream thinkers focused on the way in which the emotions represented what was stable and enduring in human beings. They were thus interested in showing how the emotions contributed to a coherent and meaningful existence. While they were well aware of the disruptions and harms that could arise from desires and emotions prompted by various kinds of

interactions with the world (such as temptations, personal tragedy, attachments), the remedy was not to reject them altogether but, rather, to cultivate oneself in such a way that they achieved their optimal form. The standard of such optimization was to be found in the very constitution of human beings. This idea that human beings possessed internal coherence, a drive for fulfillment, and a standard of optimization signaled a new moral evaluation of emotions and desires.

This affirmation of the emotions as integral features of the person was part of an entire complex of new developments in the imagination of the self and of the natural world. The awareness of human beings as possessing pattern, coherence, and order corresponded to a vision of the world as functioning according to intelligible, regular processes. It was, moreover, premised on the recognition of human cognitive potential and on an emphasis on exercising this potential in the properly lived life: that is, the idea that cosmic and human realities were pervaded by a shared pattern and structure presupposed that it was the special activity of human intelligence to grasp such unifying patterns. The mainstream account of emotions, then, went hand in hand with an emergent recognition of the human capacity for true knowledge and understanding of the world, and played a crucial role in establishing the cognitive and moral agency of the individual human self.

This chapter will retrace the broader contours of my argument, showing how the developments discussed in this book were bound up with the subsequent intellectual and political history of imperial China, and might be explained in view of this history. It will also highlight the ways in which the accounts given here bear upon some of our most deep-rooted assumptions, not only about the character and trajectory of early Chinese thought but also about the very premises of our own knowing and engagement with the world. By working out these issues, I hope to show how the early mainstream tradition might offer a fundamentally new paradigm for thinking about basic philosophical questions that are under active consideration today, and provide an opportunity to reconsider the very conceptual categories with which think about the world.

EMOTIONS AND MODELS OF THE SELF: A NEW ACCOUNT OF HUMAN AGENCY

The early mainstream account of emotions formed the basis of a new ideal of the self that affirmed the “dispositional reality” of human beings as compatible with the agency of individual human beings. The idea that human beings possessed what we might call an underlying “workings” meant that they possessed their own inner momentum to realize a potentiality intrinsic to their constitution. Like the universe itself, human beings were animated and possessed an optimal standard of fulfillment—a fulfillment that enabled them to achieve an extraordinary

agency and efficacy. The emotions played a crucial role in this vision, representing the dynamic workings within the self that propelled them toward proper and meaningful action. Endowing a shape and directionality to the ethical life, they formed the basis of an ideal of a coherent, integrated, and continuous self.

Much of the naturalistic features of this new theory was devoted to demonstrating that emotions were not just a matter of people being pushed about in a random fashion by the “things” they came into contact with. It showed instead how, conceived in the context of fulfilling one’s patterned disposition, the emotions played a role in the achievement of mastery over one’s circumstances and the attainment efficacious power. These themes emerge with particular clarity in the writings of Xunzi, who proclaimed that the difference between the *junzi* 君 (exemplary person) and the *xiao ren* 小人 (petty person) came down to who had the upper hand vis-à-vis things: “The *junzi* makes things his servants (*yi wu* 役物), while the *xiaoren* is made a servant by things (*yi yu wu* 役於物).”¹

Achieving this level of agency and mastery was immediately tied to a new awareness of the human capacity for higher cognition. The idea that human beings were endowed with intelligence was a major theme in Warring States thought, and the emotions played an important role in sustaining such a conception. For, in constituting the palpable interface between the self and the world, our emotions not only gave substance to our identity and experience as selves but also provided access to the structure and workings of reality; they were integral aspects of our perceptive and evaluative capacities. Properly cultivated, our emotions did not separate us from reality, but linked us, both physically and cognitively, to the world. Indeed, they were necessary features of the apparatus with which human beings perceived the world, formed sound judgments, and responded appropriately to their circumstances.

This ideal of optimal human fulfillment as involving the capacity to think, reason, judge, and evaluate properly has not, in my view, been much acknowledged in the scholarship on traditional Chinese thought, which has tended to attribute radically “other” properties to this tradition so as to distinguish it from the “rationalist” and “truth-seeking” tendencies of the Western philosophical tradition. Based on the account I give here, it seems quite clear that the quest for true knowledge and understanding of the world—and not just values of community, harmony, and so on—was a major preoccupation among Warring States thinkers, and that what is distinct about the early mainstream vision is the recognition that our emotive dispositions did not necessarily conflict with the endeavor to understand the world, but were a necessary part of the enterprise.

1. HXYX 4/2/19–20.

From the vantage point of thinking about the structure of the self, such an account differs from a major strand of the Western philosophical and religious tradition insofar as it does not seek to isolate some true essence of self represented by a higher intelligence that is unmoving and unmoved. It contrasts significantly, for instance, with the ancient Greek concept of *pathē*, which conceives of emotions as a matter of being affected by things in the external world, and as thus representing an aspect of human life that is fundamentally passive in nature. As James Hankinson has emphasized, emotions are “things that happen to us. Their very name suggests that they are somehow beyond our control.”² As *pathē*, emotions are sites of movement that signal our vulnerability to external forces and compromise our endeavor to achieve order and coherence in our lives. They pose a threat to our agency. The vulnerability that the emotions represent is to be contrasted with the rational faculty that is frequently described as *unmoving*, and is identified specifically with the causal force within the human self.³

The idea that the workings of the intelligent mind could help to maintain the self’s continuity in the face of emotions that could potentially disrupt it, was also forwarded in the Chinese tradition. The “*Neiye*” 內業 (Inner Workings) chapters of the *Guanzi*, for instance, argued that the way to preserve self-mastery was to purge oneself of emotions and desires so as to bring the mind/heart back to its original state of balanced perfection.⁴ However, this was not the dominant line. The mainstream tradition was woven out of the ideas of those thinkers who proposed a vision of self that accepted that emotions and desires were active in the life of a fully realized human being, and that they helped to propel this life toward fulfillment.

THE UNDERLYING PATTERN OF THINGS: INVENTING HEAVEN, EARTH, AND THE HUMAN IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

The early history of thinking about emotions in China was inextricably tied to the history of how early thinkers made sense of the workings of reality—the domain that we might today call “natural science.” The mainstream account of

2. James Hankinson, “Actions and Passions: Affection, Emotion, and Moral Self-management in Galen’s Philosophical Psychology,” in *Passions and Perceptions. Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Jacques Brunschwig and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 184–222, at 187.

3. Galen makes a point of highlighting the fact that thinking and learning involve no movement: “no special motion of the heart is evident in the act of thinking, learning and teaching, even though such a motion is clearly apparent in the case of the emotions [*pathē*].” Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, v. 271, cited and discussed in Hankinson, “Actions and Passions,” 188.

4. “If we can rid ourselves of sorrow and happiness, joy and anger, desire and profit seeking / The mind will revert to its flawless state.” *Guanzi* XVI, ch. 49, 2.1, in *Guanzi. Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China. Volume II*, trans. W. Allyn Rickett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 40.

emotions represented a way of conceptualizing the structure and workings of reality that emphasized the patterned regularity and cyclical processes underlying all phenomena, both cosmic and human. Being structurally resonant and interconnected, the cosmic and human realms could be analyzed, understood, and evaluated in the same terms—that is, in view of their inherent propensities and tendencies. As the patterned workings that rendered these domains intelligible, the emotions were instrumental in the emergence of cosmic and human reality as unified, coherent realms that were intelligible to the cognizing mind.

Approaching the discourse of emotions in light of this naturalistic orientation has provided an alternative range of possibilities for thinking about what the emotions meant, why they were of philosophical importance, and what was at stake in the early debates over emotions. Among other things, it meant that the emotions did not simply represent the individual realm of subjective experience, but were part of a larger world that operated according to knowable processes. Moreover, more than a parallel, analogous dimension that exhibited the patterned life of human beings, emotions also represented the crucial interface between self and the world, mind and cosmos. It was not a coincidence that the emergence of the mainstream account of emotions can be traced to the period of the fourth and third centuries BCE, when inquiry into the workings of Heaven and earth, and the human body and the psyche, took the form of systematic theories proposing that the world was intelligible and exhibited regularity and coherence. The posing of the question of what human emotions were can also be seen as a natural extension of this concern with grasping and mapping out the nature of reality, which was now being directed toward the human realm.

The idea that all people shared a structured, patterned constitution became the basis of the idea of the human being as a universal category. Just as the idea of Nature can be said to have been an “invention” arising from a new awareness of the natural world as an intelligible and coherent entity, so can the idea of the human be attributed, at least in part, to the idea that human beings possess a shared, characteristic disposition. This meant, among other things, that individuals were bound to one another as members of a broader human community, whose shared identity transcended personal ties to one’s family, one’s local society, and even to one’s state. By virtue of their common dispositional nature, all people could be seen as part of a universal category of the human being that transcended differences in appearance, customs, language, beliefs, modes of life, and so on. This was an argument that would be articulated with increasing insistence with the onset of empire, which depended for its very existence on the state’s ability to persuade its constituents they were naturally part of a single collectivity.

But politically, the universalist conception of the human was double-edged: if it helped to sustain the idea of empire, it also presented a challenge to it. When the emotions became implicated in the claim to true knowledge—of the Way, of the true intentions of the sages, of the nature of the world—they also offered a justification for rejecting the claims to truth and moral authority invoked by existing regimes of power. That human beings possessed, by their very nature, access to true understanding of the world was thus potentially highly subversive. It was, then, not a coincidence that Confucius, one of the earliest known proponents of an emotions-based ethics, was a political outsider who viewed with dismay the political developments of his time—a world in which mechanized forms of power were displacing the authority of past moral traditions. Nor is it surprising that, fifteen hundred years later, Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian thinkers would revive the Mencian line of the early Confucian tradition and assert their moral and intellectual authority by claiming—against a centuries-long tradition—that human emotions conferred moral and intellectual authority and gave access to the true values of the ancients and the patterns of Heaven and Earth.⁵ Neither was it fortuitous that many of those Song thinkers who took part in ethical debates about the moral-psychological constitution of human beings also engaged in cosmological speculation, and argued for a coherent picture of the world as animated by knowable processes.⁶ The idea that emotions and their proper fulfillment had normative value, and that first-person, emotionally charged experience was essential to what it meant to know and act properly in the world, could become the basis of critical opposition to the imperial drive to subsume difference within a single, all-encompassing totality. This helps to explain both why the subject of emotions in China attracted the interest that it did and why the mainstream line of thinking might have had such staying power.

AN ALTERNATIVE COGNITIVE PARADIGM?

From the point of view of our understanding of emotions more generally, my emphasis on the structuring role of emotions, and on the role of emotive intuitions and desires in perceiving the reality of the world, is very much in line with the general direction of contemporary work in the philosophy of emotions, which has been exploring the interconnections between cognitive and emotive

5. Curie Virág, "Emotions and Human Agency in the Thought of Zhu Xi," *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 37 (2007): 49–88.

6. The connection between these cosmological speculations and the Neo-Confucian conception of knowledge is treated in Curie Virág, "Penetrating Knowledge: Cognition and Cosmic Flow in Early and Medieval Chinese Philosophy," (under review).

processes. It also confirms some of the recent neurophysiological research that has been done in the study of emotions, which has shown that we cannot so neatly extricate emotive from cognitive processes. This, in turn, brings us in confrontation with the dualistic frameworks—subjectivity and objectivity, theory and practice, self and world, and ultimately, feeling and thinking—that are embedded in the very language and categories through which we approach the world, and that have led to unsatisfactory accounts of early Chinese thought.

The persistence of such categories has, I have argued, hampered our ability to recognize some basic features of early Chinese thinking, and has led to a certain kind of exoticizing that denies in the Chinese philosophical tradition the very relevance of such ideas as agency, knowledge, self, and truth. Bypassing them by attempting to reconstruct the larger conceptual paradigm that *was* at work in early theories of emotions provides us with what I believe is a richer understanding of the character of early philosophy in China—one that connects the philosophical tradition with other domains of inquiry, including natural science and political thought. A broadening of our scope of inquiry, and a recognition of the historical situatedness of philosophical debates, can also help us to refine our methodology for studying comparative thought. Highlighting the fact that concepts and ideas about emotions do not take place within topically discrete realms, but are embedded in numerous realms of thought, exposes the problems with resorting to the kinds of dichotomous categories that have prevailed in much comparative scholarship on early Chinese philosophy. Moreover, situating ideas within a temporal trajectory makes clear that the mainstream account of emotions cannot properly be considered as an essentially Chinese perspective, but as one of many competing accounts whose success and enduring influence need to be explained. It thus speaks to the importance of recognizing the temporal dimension as a necessary part of the comparative enterprise.

Finally, my investigation suggests that, in theorizing about the emotions, early Chinese thinkers were grappling with philosophical questions of a foundational nature—those that continue to be of active concern in scholarly discussions today. This offers more than a curious historical parallel: indeed, the paradigms of thinking about emotions, knowledge, and the self forwarded by the early mainstream thinkers may provide an opportunity to rethink our assumptions about basic human questions, and about philosophical inquiry itself. The idea that our emotions serve as vehicles by which we come to know the world, for instance, means among other things that the “objectivity” of our knowledge depends not upon stepping outside of the subjective vantage point, but on our capacity to occupy shifting, multiple vantage points. As we have seen with Zhuangzi and his “happy” fish, understanding involves not only a capacity to perceive the underlying unity and coherence of all things but also an ability to connect to, and resonate with,

the objects of its concern. Our emotive capacities might thus be recognized as inextricably bound up with our endeavor to understand the world.

This offers, I have argued, a quite different paradigm of knowing than what is commonly taken as foundational in modern culture—namely, the idea that the subjective and objective represent two entirely distinct orientations toward the world. In pointing to emotions as the basis of a new theory of ethics, the early mainstream Chinese thinkers sought what we might justifiably call an objective ground for morality—one that was affirmed through first-person experience but that was driven by a fundamental quest to understand the nature of reality and to access this reality through first-person experience. That it was emotions, rather than something like a disembodied soul, is significant: it points to the importance of the connections that give meaning to human life—our engagement with other living beings, and with things in the world, that ultimately impact us in physically palpable ways and transform our state of being. This emphasis on the practical and embodied nature of our experience is a perspective worth taking into account in our discussions of what philosophy is and how it can work upon us.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams confronts both the constraints and the possibilities of the philosophizing mode, and asserts that a viable ethics must go beyond the level of discursive propositions and arise out of an awareness of what one *is*. This is not a disavowal of a theoretical or reflective standpoint, in favor of a subjective one defined by one's dispositions. It is an embracement of the necessity of both kinds of engagement, both the "inside" and "outside." As Williams articulates this theoretically difficult position, "in the most obvious sense it is not true that all ethical value rests in the disposition of the self, and yet, in another way, it is true." Our dispositions become the "ultimate supports of ethical value."⁷ What this means for practice has been a greater role for the larger web of relationships that help to shape a life and that endow it with meaning. These are what foster the dispositions with which we engage in the world.

The striking parallel between recent philosophical discussions and ethical developments in early China points to the possibility of bringing the philosophical and historical investigations into dialogue with one another. The philosophical goal of this project is to invite self-reflection about basic questions of how to live, and how to sustain and ground our intuitions about what matters. To the extent that this mattering is firmly situated in the first-person experience, an understanding of the workings of our emotions is integral to this enterprise. This is an endeavor that a historical perspective can contribute to, for probing the ways in which early Chinese thinkers engaged with the issue brings us closer to understanding the structure of our own knowing and

7. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 51.

valuing: it allows us to envision, from a standpoint that is remarkably distant and yet familiar, the assumptions and norms that frame our own ethical postures. The early Chinese view that ethics is about fostering certain dispositions to act properly, and that our emotional life is basic to our endeavor to make sense of the world, may well offer a paradigm of self that is truer to experience—one that is marked by openness, rather than by an enclosed autonomy, and that recognizes that to have our destiny bound up with those of others does not threaten our sense of self but, rather, opens the way to its proper unfolding.

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