

Purity, Moral Trials, and Equanimity¹

(Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies, New Series, vol. 40, no. 2 (June 2010))

Shun Kwong-loi

1. Purity

In this paper, I will consider a phenomenon that has been discussed in both Confucian thought and contemporary western moral philosophy, though the phenomenon is conceptualized and elaborated on in different ways in these different ethical traditions. My goal is to draw inspiration from the way certain Confucian thinkers, especially Zhu Xi (1130-1200), approach this phenomenon, and to develop a way of understanding this phenomenon that both links up with contemporary western philosophical discussions and is of appeal on its own terms.² For this purpose, I will not engage in the kind of close textual analysis that will be needed in order to approximate the ideas of these thinkers as recorded in the relevant texts. I have undertaken such textual analysis in other publications, and will in this paper assume the outcome of such analysis.³ Also, while I will draw on the ideas of certain Confucian thinkers, the way I develop these ideas will at times go beyond or even deviate from what has been recorded in the relevant texts. Although the way I develop these ideas will stay close to certain core ideas of these thinkers, my primary purpose

¹ Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association (San Francisco, April 2007), International Conference on Confucian Philosophy: Reconstruction and Interpretation (Soochow University, Taiwan, May 2007), Biannual Conference of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy (Wuhan, China, June 2007), International Symposium on Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, October 2007), Beijing Forum (Beijing, China, November 2007), International Conference on Chinese Philosophy and Moral Psychology (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, December 2007) as well as at invited lectures at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong, June 2007), University of Sydney (Sydney, August 2007) and Lingnam University (Hong Kong, April 2008). I am grateful to participants for their comments on the paper. I am especially indebted to Chong Kim Chong for his detailed written comments on an earlier version of this paper, as well as to two anonymous referees of this journal for helpful comments. Portions of the materials in Sections 2 and 3 of this paper overlap with another forthcoming paper, "On Anger: An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology," David Jones and He Jinli, eds., *Zhu Xi Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Great Ultimate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to the editors of both publications for their agreement to this arrangement.

² Given the purpose of the paper, the sources I draw on include primarily Confucian texts and contemporary western philosophical discussions, and I have not included references to early Greek or medieval Christian thought or to contemporary Chinese philosophical literature, though the phenomenon under consideration is also discussed in these other sources. I am indebted to the anonymous referees for pointing out the need to add this clarification.

³ See my three papers on Zhu Xi listed at the end.

is to explore the philosophical implications of these ideas and to develop them in a way that we ourselves find appealing from our contemporary perspectives. Doing so often requires our taking these ideas in directions that go beyond what can be found in the relevant texts, and so this kind of task is very different from the kind of textual analysis referred to earlier, which seeks to approximate as much as possible ideas recorded in the texts. I have discussed elsewhere the distinction between these two different kinds of tasks, the goals and methods involved in the kind of task I am undertaking in this paper, as well as other related methodological issues.⁴

For convenience, I will label the phenomenon we will be discussing “purity”. As I will be explaining the content of this phenomenon in detail, the use of a particular label should not by itself carry any significance. Still, this term does carry connotations that are akin to the phenomenon I will be discussing. “Purity” can have the connotation of entirety or wholeness, and the connotation of absence of impurity understood as contaminating elements that are negatively evaluated. These two connotations are distinct and need not be both present in a particular use of the term. For example, in saying that a drink is pure orange juice, we are saying that the drink consists entirely of orange juice with no other ingredient, without implying that any other ingredient would be contaminating in a negative sense. On the other hand, in saying that the air is pure, our emphasis is usually on the absence of any polluting element of an undesirable kind.⁵ In the ethical context, the two connotations do naturally come together since to say that someone is not fully ethical does usually imply the presence of some elements that detract from the person’s ethical orientation, elements that are ethically undesirable.

Purity in the ethical context is a phenomenon that has been discussed both in western philosophical traditions and in Confucian thought.⁶ Within Confucian thought, there are different terms that highlight the two different connotations that we have just mentioned.⁷ The term *cheng* 誠, sometimes translated as “sincerity” and sometimes

⁴ In my “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36 (2009), pp. 455-487, I distinguish between three kinds of activities in the study of Chinese thought: textual analysis, articulation, philosophical construction. The nature of this paper is close to the second of these three kinds of activities.

⁵ Here, I draw on a distinction between two notions of purity introduced by A. D. M. Walker, “The Ideal of Sincerity,” *Mind* 87 (1978), pp. 481-497.

⁶ For examples of western discussions, see Stuart Hampshire, “Sincerity and Single-Mindedness,” *Freedom of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 232-256; John Kekes, “Constancy and Purity,” *Mind* 92 (1983), pp. 232-256; Frances Myrna, “Purity in Morals,” *Monist* 66 (1983), pp. 283-297; and A. D. M. Walker, “The Ideal of Sincerity,” pp. 481-497.

⁷ In past publications, I have used “wholeness” for the first connotation of purity and reserved “purity” for the second connotation, while pointing out that the two are intimately related in the ethical context. In this paper, I am using “purity” in the broader sense to include both connotations.

as “completeness”, captures the connotation of being entirely or wholly ethical, while the term *xu* 虛, usually translated as “vacuous” or “empty”, and the term *jing* 靜, usually translated as “still”, capture the connotation of the absence of, respectively, detracting elements and their disturbing effects. These terms highlight the different aspects of the phenomenon, which for the Confucian thinkers is the ideal state of *xin* 心, the mind or heart. Note that each of these terms has its own additional connotations that are not part of what I have included within the notion of purity. For example, *cheng* is often associated with a kind of transformative force on others as well as the nourishment of other people and things. In saying that the idea of purity is conveyed through these terms, my claim is only that the idea constitutes part of the connotations of these terms, not that it exhausts their content.⁸

To convey a sense of the way these terms are understood, I will use as an example the views of Zhu Xi in this connection, drawing on the textual studies in earlier publications. In early Chinese texts, the term *cheng* has the meaning of what is truly the case, and is used as a key term to describe what the ethical person is like. Zhu Xi explains it in terms of a number of ideas. According to him, *cheng* involves being genuine and real.⁹ It involves being good both on the outside and the inside – not just in one’s words and actions, but also in one’s thoughts and sentiments.¹⁰ If one is *cheng*, one follows the Way spontaneously without effort.¹¹ More interestingly, a point that we will come back to later in the paper, Zhu Xi relates it to the idea of being one:

“Being one is *cheng* and being two is to be mixed.”¹²

The idea of being two he explains as follows:

“It is as if there were two people within one’s mind. When one is about to do good, evil starts to intrude. And when one is about to do something bad, one feels a sense of shame. ... This observation by Master Cheng describes those aspects in which one’s

⁸ I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need to add this clarification.

⁹ “Being genuine and real, and being without irregularity, is what is meant by *cheng*.” In Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong Zhangju, Sikuquanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1983-1986), 11a.

¹⁰ “It is only because it is the same outside and inside that we call it *cheng*. If one does good on the outside and yet there is badness in one’s thoughts, this is not *cheng*. If one does good and yet not persistently, and does it today and not tomorrow, this is not *cheng*.” In Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), p. 543.

¹¹ “If one is *cheng*, then ... one naturally follows the Way without thinking and without effort.” In Zhu Xi, *Commentary on Zhou Dunyi’s Tongshu, Zhou Dunyi Ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1990), p. 14.

¹² Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 304.

thoughts are not *cheng* and one's mind is not real.”¹³

Thus, *cheng* involves one's thoughts and sentiments being not mixed and all pointing in the same direction.¹⁴ In sum, it refers to the complete ethical orientation of the mind, without any discrepancy between the inner and the outer, or among the thoughts and sentiments inside the mind.

Turning to the terms *xu* and *jing*, *xu* in early Chinese texts has the meaning of being unfilled, and as a result being receptive and responsive. In Confucian thought, it refers to a state in which the mind is not affected by any problematic element that can detract from its proper responsiveness. Zhu Xi compares the mind that is *xu* to a clear mirror that is not obscured by dust:

“The mind of the sage ... is like a mirror; when it is not yet reflecting anything, all there is to it is *xu*.”¹⁵

“It (luminous virtue) is like a mirror. It is originally clear, but when obscured by dust, it cannot accurately reflect. One has to wipe away the dust, and the mirror once again becomes clear.”¹⁶

Another favorite metaphor of his is that of still water – when water is still, it is clear and can act as a mirror.¹⁷ The metaphor of water relates to the term *jing*, which has the meaning of being still as opposed to moving.¹⁸ When water is moving around, the sediments are disturbed and water turns muddy. On the other hand, when water is still, it is clear and can act as a mirror. While *xu* emphasizes the absence of detracting elements of the mind, *jing* emphasizes the state of the mind when it is settled and not moving around.

The above summary sketches the way the phenomenon of purity is viewed by Zhu Xi. To further probe the nature of this phenomenon, I will approach it from two different

¹³ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 1721.

¹⁴ This phenomenon is close to the idea of singleness or undividedness of the mind discussed by Stuart Hampshire, “Sincerity and Single-Mindedness,” p. 245; see also A. D. M. Walker, “The Ideal of Sincerity,” pp. 484-7.

¹⁵ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Daquan, Sibubeiyao* (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 67.3b-4a.

¹⁶ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 267.

¹⁷ “The mind is not settled, and that is why it cannot discern pattern (*li* 理). ... One should first settle the mind, and make it like still water or a clear mirror.” In Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 177.

¹⁸ “*Jing* means that the mind does not move around out of control.” In Zhu Xi, *Daxue Zhangju, Sikuquanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983-1986), 1b. “It is like walking – if one knows where to go, then one's mind is settled, and there is no further uncertainty. And if there is no uncertainty, then the mind is *jing*.” In Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 275.

directions. First, purity of the mind, as conveyed through the use of the terms *cheng*, *xu*, and *jing*, is an ideal state of mind that one works toward. To help our understanding of this state of mind, I will discuss the moral trials one faces in life and the kind of vigilance one has to exercise in ensuring appropriate responses to situations that pose potential challenges. In this connection, I will discuss two ways of exercising such vigilance highlighted by Zhu Xi, mental concentration and watchfulness. Second, I will also consider the sort of perspective that makes it possible for one to maintain proper responses to the challenging situations and adverse circumstances of life. For convenience, I will introduce the label “equanimity” to refer to such a perspective, and explain the content of the perspective in terms of a number of ideas in Confucian thought. These ideas are already highlighted in early Confucian texts, and they are taken up and endorsed by the later Confucian thinkers. They include, for example, the idea of *ming* 命, a term often translated as “decree” or “destiny” and often used to convey an attitude of acceptance toward the adverse circumstances of life, as well as the idea that the ethical person should be free from worries and be in a state of *le* 樂, a term often translated as “joy”. Having discussed these two phenomena, moral trials and equanimity, I will conclude with a discussion of purity that draws on the results of this discussion.

2. Moral Trials

Having summarized the idea of purity as understood by Zhu Xi, I will approach the phenomenon as a state that one works toward and approximates as one progresses morally in life. Consider the following autobiographical statement by Confucius:

“The Master said, ‘At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I took my stand; at forty I was never in two minds; at fifty I understood the Decree (*ming*) of Heaven, at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping proper boundaries.’”¹⁹

At the age of seventy, Confucius was able to follow his heart’s desires without overstepping proper boundaries. This description can be taken to illustrate the state of purity – his mind was fully oriented in an ethical direction, free from problematic influences, and he was able to respond appropriately to situations without effort.²⁰ His

¹⁹ In *Lunyu* 2.4, following the numbering of passages in Yang Bojun, *Mengzi Yizhu*, second edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1980).

²⁰ In making this claim, I am not claiming that Confucius’ state of mind at the age of seventy has been presented using such terms as *cheng*, *xu* or *jing* in the *Lunyu* or in any other Confucian text. The claim

autobiographical statement also presents him as getting to this point after a life time of learning. Furthermore, he has spent years of his life seeking political reform. He was seen as a threat to those in power, repeatedly undermined and obstructed, and eventually withdrew from politics to devote his energy to teaching. On one interpretation, the realization of the futility of his political endeavors is what he experienced at the age of fifty, when he finally understood *ming*.

Confucius' experience was shared by many Confucian thinkers up to the nineteenth century. Many of them were not just scholars, but were in public office in one capacity or another for most of their adult life. Quite a number of them found themselves in corrupt political environments, and the moral trials they have gone through are often reflected in their teachings. The records we have of their teachings are not based on pure scholarship, but often relate back to their own ethical experiences. A discussion of these trying experiences will help our understanding of the state of mind that Confucius attained at the age of seventy.

Let us therefore imagine the situation of a Confucian official who seeks reform in a corrupt political environment. Those in power are pre-occupied with power, status, and reputation, and have no genuine concern for those whom they are supposed to serve. They freely manipulate perception as a way to enhance favorable views of themselves and to discredit their opponents. In seeking to reform the situation, this official is seen as a threat by those in power, and every effort is made to eliminate this perceived threat, including spreading rumors to undermine his credibility. How, from the Confucian perspective, should the official respond to the situation?

Certain things are not out of place. The individual would feel injured, and there would be emotional responses such as anger at the injustice done. If possible, he would act in appropriate ways to correct the situation, such as by bringing the facts to light. And knowing about the situation, he would be more cautious in the future to avoid further distortion of his motives. At the same time, he would not commit an injustice to defend himself, nor attempt to injure the other parties out of vindictiveness. Even when speaking to correct the facts, he would consciously avoid the slight exaggeration, or the deliberate choice of tone, that could have helped manipulate

is only that Confucius' state of mind is one in which it is fully oriented in an ethical direction and is free from problematic influences, independently of whether that state of mind has been described using these specific Chinese terms. Also, this claim about Confucius' state of mind leaves it open how we view the content of such a state. For example, if we hold the view that the ethical orientation of the mind has primarily to do with *li* 礼 (rites), then the claim is that Confucius' state of mind is fully oriented in accordance with *li* and is free from any tendency that might lead one to deviate from *li*. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need to add this clarification.

perception against his opponents. Being experienced in politics, he knows the usual strategies at manipulating perception, such as strategically dropping certain words to the right people to generate rumors of certain kinds. But, unlike his opponents, he sees the effects of such maneuvers as a reason against, rather than a reason for, adopting these strategies.

In addition, when dealing with his opponents in other unrelated contexts, he would not treat them in a way that is prejudiced by the treatment he has received from them in the political context. He would treat them as he would have treated others, even if doing so would be to their advantage. This includes not just refraining from committing an injustice against them, but also defending them if they are themselves unjustly treated. Even if he would not commit an injustice against the parties who have injured him, and is ready to speak in their defense if they are themselves treated unjustly, he might still feel a secret pleasure should they suffer some misfortune. He might still wish them to suffer, though not through his action, or his inaction. He might take pleasure not just in the actual misfortune they suffer, but in the mere thought of such misfortune. Again, for him to respond appropriately to the situation, he would not feel pleasure of this kind.

This brief discussion illustrates how, to ensure the proper response to the situation, one has to be watchful over not just one's actions, but also the subtle activities of the mind, such as the secret pleasure one might feel at the opponents' misfortune. These subtle and minute movements of the mind are inconspicuous to others and known to oneself alone. In later Confucian thought, the need to be watchful over these movements of the mind is conveyed through the idea of being watchful over *du* 獨, an idea already found in early Confucian texts such as the *Zhongyong*:

“... the superior person is cautious over what he does not see and apprehensive over what he does not hear. There is nothing more visible than what is hidden and nothing more manifest than what is subtle. Therefore the superior person is watchful over *du*.”²¹

The term *du* has the literal meaning of being alone, and Zhu Xi takes it to refer to the subtle and minute activities of the mind that others do not know about, but one alone (*du*) knows about:

²¹ *Zhongyong* chapter 1, following Zhu Xi's division of the text into chapters in Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong zhangju*, *Sikuquanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983-1986).

“*Du* has to do with what others do not know and one alone knows. It refers to the minute and subtle affairs in the hidden realm. Although they have not taken shape, their *ji* 幾 has already been activated. Although others do not know about them, one alone knows about them.”²²

In this quote, he explains *du* in terms of another character *ji*, which is explained in the *Yijing* as the minute aspects of activity. It is taken by later Confucians to refer to what is on the verge of emerging but has not yet taken shape – it lies between the non-existent and the existent. This is what Zhu Xi means by *ji*:

“*Ji* is the minute aspect of activity, and it lies between the not yet active and the about to be active. The distinction between good and evil arises here, and this is where one should devote attention. If it has already been manifested outwardly, what more could one do about it? This is why the sages and worthies speak of being watchful over *du* – they want to urge people to attend to the *ji* and the minute.”²³

So, to be watchful over *du* is to be attentive to the subtle and minute activities of the mind when they are about to emerge, ensuring that they are properly directed. While watchfulness over *du* is directed to the minute activities about to emerge in the mind, the idea of caution and apprehension in the passage from the *Zhongyong* emphasizes a general attitude that one maintains at all times.²⁴ This more general attitude Zhu Xi also describes in terms of another term *jing* 敬.²⁵ Following the Cheng brothers, he describes *jing* in terms of the mind being one and undivided.²⁶ It is a state of mind when one is not distracted by other things when focused on one thing, and involves a posture of being constantly alert.²⁷ So, *jing* has to do one’s being fully in control of one’s mental attention, and one’s being fully alert so that one is not vulnerable to distractions. As an individual confronts the moral complexities of the world and goes through all kinds of moral challenges, he needs to be constantly self-reflective and

²² Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong Zhangju*, 2a.

²³ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 1949.

²⁴ “Caution” is a translation of *jieshen* 戒慎, and “apprehension” a translation of *kongju* 恐懼. For an analysis of the connotations of these four characters, see my “Wholeness in Confucian Thought: Zhu Xi on *Cheng*, *Zhong*, *Xin* and *Jing*,” in On-cho Ng ed. *The Imperative of Understanding: Chinese Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, and Onto-Hermeneutics* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008), pp. 261-272.

²⁵ In early texts, *jing* is related to both *jie* and *shen* and is presented as a way to cultivate oneself. Zhu Xi relates it to *jie shen* and *kong ju* as these terms occur in the *Zhongyong* – see Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, pp. 2471, 2767. For further elaboration on the nature of *jing*, see my “Wholeness in Confucian Thought: Zhu Xi on *Cheng*, *Zhong*, *Xin* and *Jing*,” pp. 261-272.

²⁶ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, p. 2635. See also Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, *Henan Chengshi Yishu* 15.5a, 15.20a, and *Ercheng Cuiyan* 1.3b, both in *Ercheng Quanshu*, *Sibubeiyao* (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965).

²⁷ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, pp. 494, 2464, 2467, 2788, 2936

vigilant in these manners. The ideas of being watchful over *du* and of *jing* are illustrations of the Confucian emphasis on the inner management of the mind.

3. **Equanimity**

Before considering the bearing of the above discussion on the idea of purity, let us probe more deeply the perspective of this individual that underlies his response to the situation that I have just described. It is difficult to convey this perspective in simple terms, but for convenience, I will call this a state of equanimity. There are four ways of describing the perspective of the Confucian official that do not capture his state of mind.

First, his response is not based on mental fitness – he does not just endure the pain and injury he has suffered and, through mental elasticity, manages to put it behind. Second, his response is not based on forgetfulness – he does not just note but ignore or forget the injustice done, thereby rendering the situation painless. Third, his response is not based on reconciliation – he does not eliminate the offence he felt through an act of reconciliation with the other party, as happens in the case of forgiveness. And fourth, his response is not based on intellectual effort – he does not, with the help of some degree of sympathy, seek out mitigating circumstances of the offending parties or possible alternative interpretations, thereby playing down the offence. In each of these four descriptions, it is assumed that he has taken offence at the situation, thereby creating a state of mind that needs to be addressed. The first two address it by suppressing one's sense of offence through mental effort or omission, while the last two address it by eliminating the sense of offence through a transformation of one's outlook on the situation.²⁸

By contrast, the individual we are considering did not take offence at the situation to start with. He is aware that deliberate attempts have been made to undermine him and damage his reputation. He would view that as hurtful, and yet would regard such injury as of minor significance. In Confucian writings, we see the repeated warning against attaching undue importance to the opinions of others, such as the observation that one should not be disturbed if not appreciated by others.²⁹ Confucian thinkers also distinguish between social honor and disgrace, and ethical honor and disgrace.

²⁸ I have been helped by the elaborate discussion in Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelly (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), which talks about these different ways of addressing one's sense of offence.

²⁹ *Lunyu* 1.1

The most direct statement of this is by Xunzi:

“The superior person can have social disgrace but not ethical disgrace; the inferior person can have social honor but not ethical honor ...”³⁰

So, what will be truly shameful to the individual would be if he had responded in problematic ways to the situation, such as by acting out of vindictiveness. This he would regard as true injury, but something that he alone can do to himself.

There is, then, in him a sense of invulnerability – however others might try to manipulate perception against him, what they can affect are external conditions that, though mattering to him, are only of minor significance. If he had responded inappropriately to the situation, then his opponents would indeed have succeeded in injuring him, but only because he himself had allowed this to happen. This perspective can be deeply unsettling to his opponents, who would feel slighted, as apparently their malicious actions have gone unnoticed, or are not viewed in the way that they wished them to be.

Adding to the discomfort is the sense of uprightness surrounding this individual. His moral stance could be seen as a threat, as others’ ethical shortcomings are highlighted in his presence. Furthermore, there is an insistence on not hiding his moral stance as a way of appeasing others. His situation is the reverse of that of the village worthy as described in the *Mengzi*.³¹ The village worthy seeks to manipulate perception so as to project an image of being morally decent, thereby gaining the favorable opinions of others. He is a ‘thief of virtue’ in that he steals the name of virtue by his manipulative moves; in doing so, he undermines the very conception of that to which he makes a false claim. In the case of the individual we are considering, the corresponding tendency would be to portray himself as going along with inferior standards as a way to protect himself against condemnation. From the Confucian perspective, he should not yield to such tendencies in his efforts to reform a corrupt political environment. If he had bent himself in this situation, he would have encouraged those with lower standards, thereby preventing the very reform that he seeks.³²

Given this stance, the individual is in a sense defenseless against evil. Having had experience of the complexity of political life, he need not lack knowledge of the

³⁰ Xunzi, *Sibubeiyao* (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 12.12b.

³¹ *Mengzi* 7B:37, following the numbering of passages in Yang Bojun, *Mengzi Yizhu*, second edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984).

³² *Mengzi* 3B:1.

strategies and skills at manipulating perceptions to counter, or even to outmaneuver, his opponents. And yet he is unable to put what he knows to use because of the kind of person he is. This is an instance of knowing how, while still lacking the ability – the inability comes from the heart and not from lack of skill. Indeed, if he had engaged in these manipulative maneuvers, he would not have succeeded in countering his opponents. Instead, his doing so would have already done injury to himself, thereby allowing his opponents to succeed in their goals. Once he concludes that it is impossible to bring about reform in this environment, he would extract himself from the situation. Failure to do so would be a cause for shame.³³

The invulnerability described earlier does not mean that this individual is not vulnerable to harm or misfortune in his circumstances. It means only that he is not vulnerable to the kind of injury that matters the most to him, in the sense that such injury would come about only if he himself allows this to happen. While one might not be in a position to influence the external circumstances of life, or to influence them without deviating from the ethical, one could through the perspective just described transcend such circumstances.

This attitude toward the external circumstances of life is conveyed through the Confucian understanding of *ming* 命, a term often translated as “destiny” or “decree”. This attitude involves one’s willingly accepting unfavorable conditions of life that are not within one’s control or are of such a nature that altering them requires improper conduct.³⁴ This does not mean that one is not affected by these unfavorable conditions of life – one would grieve at the death of parents, be disappointed by the lack of appreciation by others, and lament the social and political disorder that prevails.³⁵ However, one would not direct one’s emotional energy to blaming others or complaining about the outcome, and one would not become bitter and resentful and as a result lose one’s proper perspective on what has happened.³⁶ Also, it does not mean that one is resigned to the situation in the sense that one becomes totally passive. One would still await and welcome the possibility of change, and even when such opportunities do not arise, one would redirect one’s energy in a positive direction, as in the case of Confucius’ redirecting his energy to teaching having come to a realization of the futility of his political endeavors. Furthermore, there is also a positive affirmation of the ethical values that one stands by in such circumstances.

³³ *Lunyu* 8.13.

³⁴ See my *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 77-83, for a more detailed discussion of *ming*.

³⁵ Thus the Confucian position is not the kind of anti-worldly tradition that is ascribed to Kierkegaard by John Kekes, “Constancy and Purity,” pp. 511-2.

³⁶ See, e.g., *Lunyu* 14.35.

The idea of acceptance is related to the idea that one should not be perturbed by adverse circumstances of life, an idea conveyed in the Confucian conception of courage, which is put by Mencius in terms of the “unmoved mind”, and explained by Zhu Xi as the absence of fear and uncertainty.³⁷ In addition to the acceptance of adverse circumstances, Confucian texts sometimes describe the individual’s frame of mind in terms of the absence of worries, and in terms of *le* 樂, a character often translated as “joy”.³⁸ For example, the *Lunyu* gives the following depiction of his student Yan Hui:

“The Master said, ‘How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find insupportable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his *le*. How admirable Hui is!’”³⁹

In other passages of the *Lunyu*, Confucius also describes himself in terms of *le*.⁴⁰ It might seem puzzling how one could be in a state of joy while confronting adverse conditions of life – even if one has accepted these conditions in the sense described earlier, one would still recognize these as undesirable circumstances and would respond emotionally to them. Probably, though “joy” is a common translation of *le*, *le* in early Chinese thought emphasizes less a state of emotional exhilaration or excitement, but a state of moving along with the flow of things, calmly and without obstruction or constraint. The character for *le* is identical with the character *yue* which refers to music, and the *Mengzi* on occasions relate *le* to *yue*.⁴¹ On one occasion, it relates *le* to the imagery of one’s “dancing with one’s feet and waving one’s arms” to the rhythm of music.⁴² This suggests that *le* probably has to do with a state of calmly and contentedly moving along with the flow of things, in the way that one moves along with the rhythm of music. This understanding of *le* is conveyed in Zhu Xi’s comments on this passage from the *Mengzi* and the passage from the *Lunyu* regarding Yan Hui’s *le* – Zhu Xi explains *le* in terms of one’s flowing along with things contentedly and without effort.⁴³ This understanding of *le* is also found in other early texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, which related *le* to a state of freely wandering and on one occasion describes the *le* of a fish in terms of its moving with the flow of water

³⁷ See *Mengzi* 2A:2; Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu*, *Sikuquanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983-1986), 2.3b.

³⁸ An example of the reference to the lack of worries is in *Lunyu* 9.29.

³⁹ *Lunyu* 6.11.

⁴⁰ *Lunyu* 7.16, 7.19.

⁴¹ E.g., *Mengzi* 1B:1.

⁴² *Mengzi* 4A:27.

⁴³ Zhu Xi, *Lunyu Huowen*, *Sikuquanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983-1986), 11.12a, and Zhu Xi, *Mengzi Jizhu*, 4.15a-b.

contentedly and without constraint.⁴⁴

Returning to the situation of the Confucian official we have been discussing, the individual accepts the unfortunate situation he is in, in the sense that he would not conduct himself inappropriately to address the situation, is not perturbed by what has taken place, and does not feel bitter and resentful about the situation. Not attaching the kind of significance to external conditions of life that many others would, he does not view the situation as a personal situation in which he had been injured. Instead, he viewed it primarily as an ethical situation, one in which others display their moral inferiority through their manipulative maneuvers, and one in which he himself is put to the moral test. He does not deny the evil that occurred, but the evil is not seen as a personal offence. He would still feel hurt by what has happened, and be deeply disappointed that evil had prevailed and he had to extract himself from the situation. But he has not been injured in the way that truly matters to him as long as he conducts himself appropriately. There is no spite or vengefulness; there might be anger, but this is directed at the problematic behavior of others, not at what was done to him. Furthermore, he takes contentment in following the ethical path, and in knowing that whatever treatment he might have received, he has not been diminished in any way or been injured in any significant sense. The label “equanimity” which I have introduced for this attitude of the individual is intended to capture this detached posture – even though the individual might still feel pained by the situation and respond in an emotionally engaged fashion, he at the same time takes on a more detached posture that enables him to be not affected in a fundamental way by the situation.

To summarize, equanimity involves a sense of independence from the external conditions of life, and hence also a sense of invulnerability, since others can only affect the external conditions of life to which one attaches little significance. At the same time, it also involves the sense that what is truly of significance, namely, maintaining one’s ethical posture in life, is fully within one’s control. Accordingly, one is on the one hand free from the kind of worries and anxiety that is directed to external conditions of life, and on the other hand, feels contentment at what is of true significance and within one’s control, namely, the practice of the Way.

4. Purity revisited

⁴⁴ *Zhuangzi, Sibubeiyao* (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 7.18a and 6.15a-b. See also *Zhuangzi*, chapter 18, for a discourse on the supreme form of *le*.

I engaged in a discussion of moral trials in order to arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon of purity. By moral trial, I do not mean that the individual is necessarily tempted to act inappropriately. All it involves is that the individual sees the situation as an ethical situation posing challenges of an unusual kind, and hence calling for heightened reflectivity and vigilance. In the example I described, the Confucian official was not tempted to acts of vengefulness or subject to resentment and vindictiveness. At the same time, he did find what he confronted a challenging ethical situation, and was reflective and vigilant in responding to the situation.

Turning to the notion of purity, it might appear that the phenomenon of moral trial is incompatible with the purity of the mind. If an individual finds a situation trying and has to exercise vigilance to ensure proper response, it appears that his mind must already be lacking in purity. On this understanding of purity, it is a state in which one responds spontaneously and in appropriate ways to situations one confronts, without the need for reflection and vigilance.

This understanding of purity links up with a way of interpreting another idea in Confucian thought, namely, the distinction between the sage and the student. On one interpretation, the sage is someone who is spontaneously and unreflectively good, someone who just responds to every situation spontaneously, without the need for reflection and vigilance. This seems to characterize Confucius' state of mind at the age of seventy, when he could follow his heart's desires without overstepping proper boundaries. And one might compare this state of mind to that of an innocent child, and see the task of self-cultivation as one of retaining or restoring the heart of the innocent child, an idea apparently conveyed in this remark of Mencius':

“A great man is one who retains the heart of a newborn babe.”⁴⁵

By contrast, the student is someone who is trying to attain this spontaneous state of goodness. Our discussion of moral trials, it seems, pertains only to the student but not to the sage.

This cannot be the correct picture. Even in the case of Confucius, he was able to follow his heart's desires without overstepping proper boundaries only after a life time of moral learning. He himself went through various moral struggles in the political context; on one interpretation, his understanding *ming* at the age of fifty describes his finally turning his attention to teaching after giving up hope of political reform. So, at

⁴⁵ *Mengzi* 4B:12.

the age of seventy, Confucius could not be unaware of the moral complexities of life, in the way that an innocent child living in a protected environment would.

A more plausible description of his state of mind is that, having gone through the trials and tribulations of life, he has undergone a gradual transformation that enables him to respond appropriately and without effort to a progressively broadening range of situations. He had developed not just a repertoire of responses, but also his capacity at reflection and vigilance. He might not have to exercise this capacity at the end of his life because of his experience – the situations he confronted were by now all familiar, and given the gradual transformation he had undergone, they no longer pose the kind of challenge that he faced earlier in life. But he still had this capacity, which would be triggered and would need to be exercised if he had confronted new and challenging situations. So, even at the age of seventy, his responses must still exhibit some minimal degree of reflectivity, one that enabled him to be aware of the appropriateness of his responses and to identify new challenges when they arise. His state of mind is unlike that of someone who has, for her whole life, lived in a protected environment, never exposed to the moral complexities of life, and never having to question her own responses to situations she confronts.

This is what we would expect of moral progress. Persistently living in a protected environment could be detrimental to moral progress by preventing opportunities for such growth, even if the individual is able to always respond appropriately to the limited range of situations she encounters. On this picture, sagehood is not an end point that can be attained at a certain point in one's life, and be maintained thereafter. Instead, it defines a direction in which one should progress, and the student is someone seeking to move in this direction. Different individuals can be more or less advanced on this path, but there is no end point to which anyone can claim. The difference is more a difference in experience, in the capacity at reflection and vigilance, and in degree of moral maturity. However advanced one might be on this path, and even if one no longer encounters new situations that pose new challenges, the potential for new challenge is always there as long as one lives. This explains why Zengzi, a student of Confucius, portrays the pursuit of *ren* 仁 (humanity, benevolence) as a process that ends only with death.⁴⁶ So, purity of the mind is not a state of child-like innocence without awareness of the moral complexity of the world, but one that involves reflection and vigilance.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Lunyu* 8.7.

⁴⁷ The idea that the mind should ideally be reflective rather than being in a state of childlike innocence has been emphasized by a number of authors. For example, Stuart Hampshire, "Sincerity and Single-Mindedness," p. 246, argues that sincerity should involve a form of self-watching rather than

Earlier, we mentioned that purity also has the connotation of entirety, of being one, and one might wonder if the reflection and vigilance that we have described are compatible with this unmixed state of the mind. In a sense, reflection and vigilance do mean that the mind is operating at two different levels. On the one hand, there is the actual response to the situation one confronts. On the other hand, there is the awareness and monitoring that ensures that one's responses are appropriate, and that trigger a heightened degree of vigilance when new challenges arise. This dual aspect of the mind's operation, however, need not conflict with the oneness of the mind.

As we saw at the beginning of the paper, Zhu Xi relates *cheng* to the idea of being one rather than two, while explaining the idea of being two in terms of the mind being pulled in two different directions. Now, even when challenges arise and the mind is highly vigilant, it does not mean that one is actually drawn by possibilities that are problematic and that the mind is torn between two different directions. Instead, as we mentioned in describing the notion of moral trial, one might be aware of the options but at the same time regard them as not genuine options. It is because the mind has this awareness that it can ensure that one is not unthinkingly drawn by these possibilities, but one might never have any doubt, or need to go through an internal struggle, to respond appropriately to the situation. So, if the oneness of the mind means that the mind is not torn between different directions, the reflectivity and vigilance we have been focusing on are not only compatible with, but actually make possible, the oneness of the mind.

being a state of mere naturalness. John Kekes, "Constancy and Purity," pp. 517-8, advocates a state of reflective purity over that of pre-reflective purity, arguing that the former is compatible with the yearning for spontaneity that comes with the latter. Likewise, in her elaborate discussion of the subject, Frances Mryna, "Purity in Morals," pp. 283-297, advocates what she calls mature purity, which involves being watchful and self-scrutinizing, over a state of naïve innocence which is unself-conscious, instinctive, and free from any worldly experience of moral conflict.

References

Early Sources

- Cheng Yi 程頤 and Cheng Hao 程顥. *Ercheng Cuiyan* 二程粹言 in *Ercheng Quanshu* 二程全書. *Sibubeiyao* 四部備要. Taibei 臺北: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1965.
- *Henan Chengshi Yishu* 河南程氏遺書 in *Ercheng Quanshu* 二程全書. *Sibubeiyao* 四部備要. Taibei 臺北: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1965.
- Lunyu* 論語. Following the numbering of passages in Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 *Lunyu Yizhu* 論語譯注, second edition. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980.
- Mengzi* 孟子. Following the numbering of passages in Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 *Mengzi Yizhu* 孟子譯注, second edition. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1984.
- Xunzi* 荀子. *Sibubeiyao* 四部備要. Taibei 臺北: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1965.
- Zhongyong* 中庸. Following Zhu Xi's division of the text into chapters in his *Zhongyong Zhangju* 中庸章句. *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書. Taibei 臺北: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983-1986.
- Zhu Xi 朱熹. *Daxue Zhangju* 大學章句. *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書. Taibei 臺北: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983-1986.
- *Lunyu Huowen* 論語或問. *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書. Taibei 臺北: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983-1986.
- *Mengzi Jizhu* 孟子集注. *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書. Taibei 臺北: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983-1986.
- *Zhongyong Zhangju* 中庸章句. *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書. Taibei 臺北: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983-1986.
- Commentary on Zhou Dunyi's 周敦頤 *Tongshu* 通書, in *Zhou Dunyi Ji* 周敦頤集. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1990.
- *Zhuzi Daquan* 朱子大全. *Sibubeiyao* 四部備要. Taibei 臺北: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1965.
- *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1986.

Zhuangzi 莊子. *Sibubeiyao* 四部備要. Taipei 臺北: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1965.

Contemporary Sources

Stuart Hampshire, “Sincerity and Single-Mindedness,” *Freedom of Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 232-256.

Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelly. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

John Kekes, “Constancy and Purity,” *Mind* 92 (1983), pp. 499-518.

Frances Myrna, “Purity in Morals,” *Monist* 66 (1983), pp. 283-297.

Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

_____. “Zhu Xi on *Gong* and *Si*,” *Dao* 5 (2005), pp. 1-9.

_____. “Purity in Confucian Thought: Zhu Xi on *Xu*, *Jing*, and *Wu*”, in Kim Chong Chong and Yuli Liu eds. *Conceptions of Virtue: East and West*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2006, pp. 195-212.

_____. “Wholeness in Confucian Thought: Zhu Xi on *Cheng*, *Zhong*, *Xin*, and *Jing*,” in On-cho Ng ed. *The Imperative of Understanding: Chinese Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, and Onto-Hermeneutics*. New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008, pp. 261-272

_____. “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36 (2009), pp. 455-487.

A.D.M. Walker, “The Ideal of Sincerity,” *Mind* 87 (1978), pp. 481-497.