A Response to Thorian Harris

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Philosophy is best conducted face-to-face, because it is in the continual back-and-forth of learning and teaching that takes place in conversation that we make the most progress. The opportunity to reply to a charitable and yet challenging review of one’s book, I have now discovered, is a surprisingly close approximation to face-to-face philosophy. This is all the more true when I have already learned from the reviewer’s teachers, was responding (in part) to them in my book, and now Thorian Harris offers his own perspective. I hope that my replies here, and Harris’s subsequent rejoinder, can help make the conversation that much more constructive. I will focus on two points: the issue of whether concrete exemplars drop out of my account in favor of an abstract ideal of sagehood, and the question of whether my account is too individualist, perhaps because of my drawing too much on a “virtue ethics” framework.

Striving to be a sage, on my account, means striving to realize Coherence or harmony (which are fundamentally the same things). Harris worries that in order to balance out the subjective or particularist aspect of perceiving Coherence, I lean too far in an objectivist direction, with the result that “the norm of sagehood will lose much of its content, abstracted as it is from particular narratives, contexts, and personalities.” Instead of modeling on exemplars, Harris suggests that I may be left with such an abstract ideal of sagehood that a vague notion of “natural patterns” is doing the actual normative work, and he implies that this impoverished, remote abstraction would lose much of the power of Confucian ethical teaching.
Harris is right to see that the balance between the objective and subjective dimensions of Coherence is an important fulcrum in my account of Neo-Confucianism, and I appreciate his challenges around the issue. Coherence depends in important ways on us. It is, I have argued, the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together, and it is we who find things to be “valuable” and “intelligible.” Coherence is not something abstract and disconnected from us and from our reactions to the world, but rather is partly constituted by these reactions. On the other hand, I think Harris goes slightly too far in a subjectivist direction when he says that humans “create” Coherence in response to changing contexts. It all depends on what, exactly, one means by “create,” but I think that words like “articulate” are more precise. To say that we find and articulate Coherence better honors the objective dimension of Coherence, which all Neo-Confucians recognize. To illustrate: Harris says that “warfare has its own coherence, and yet can be horrific and normatively bankrupt.” How do we know what to make of a given war? Is it simply up to those involved and their reactions? No: one of the fundamental points about Coherence is the way that any given pattern of Coherence both contains smaller sub-patterns and is nested in larger ones. Choosing to ignore these relationships, or being ignorant of them, does not mean that a war of conquest suddenly counts as Coherent. The Coherence of a specific pattern of international relations depends on how it fits within these broader patterns, all the way up to Universal Coherence (tianli, the harmony of everything). This is how Zhu Xi explains that certain punitive expeditions undertaken by ancient sages were proper, while most wars are wrong.

Two more point about Coherence, objectivity, and exemplars. First, I go some way toward answering Harris’s objection about relying on an abstract theory of
Coherence on pp. 58-9. I contrast the Neo-Confucian position with that of Francis Hutcheson, the 18th century sentimentalist moral philosopher. Since Hutcheson believed our moral sense directed us toward those actions which produce “the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers,” it was possible for subsequent philosophers to abstract away from the reactions of the moral sense—on which Hutcheson himself had placed great weight—and simply use an objective notion of the “greatest happiness” as their ethical standard. Even if the resulting utilitarianism may be subject to something very much like Harris’s criticism (as too remote and unmotivating), though, I believe that Neo-Confucian Coherence cannot be abstracted into a “theory of Coherence,” separate from one’s actual reactions. Second, part of my reason for this is that when we look at Neo-Confucian moral education, specific exemplars play critical roles. It is true that rules of ritual conduct are also important, but as I explain, these are important primarily at early stages. As one progresses, the key is to see deeply into the heartmind of an exemplar and then to look within oneself, trying—quite literally—to take the lesson to heart (see, e.g., pp. 148-9). My ninth chapter, which engages extensively with recent research on morally exemplary people, is also meant to suggest that there is still more for all of us, contemporary Confucians included, to learn from exemplars.

Harris’s second major challenge goes as follows: by relying too heavily on an analogy with Western virtue ethics, I commit myself to an overly individualistic reading of Neo-Confucianism, which “distorts” Neo-Confucian ethics and leads me to think that there is a “political problem” with sagehood, when in fact no such problem exists. If we take the relational character of the sage seriously, Harris suggests, then “Shun-the-sage is perhaps best understood as shorthand for the flourishing community in which he
participated.” Talk of individual agency is a “distorting lens if taken too literally.” Once we see things in the relational way, the political problem—that is, the problematic link between totalitarianism and building one’s conception of politics around the sage-kings—goes away. “If sagehood and a flourishing community are mutually implicated, it becomes much more difficult to see how a sage could contribute to problematic politics.”

There is a degree to truth in all of this. All agree, I think, that relationality is critical to both classical and Neo-Confucianism. But this is one insight among others, and must be balanced against the manifest focus in Neo-Confucian writings on individual ethical education and transformation. The idea that “sage” really stands in for “flourishing community” is a wild exaggeration that would make no sense of the texts. Sages are individual people, just like you or me. Their good—that which they are striving to realize in the world—is Coherence, which is fundamentally relational. Indeed, each individual’s perspective is shot through with relationality. My own perspectives on matters before me are articulated by the facts that I am son, father, spouse, and teacher, as well as member of a variety of partly overlapping communities. To various degrees, the perspectives of others (for example, my daughter’s and my wife’s experiences in middle school, as I understand them) shape how I view things. Capacious relationality will tend to correspond to a broad inclusiveness of perspectives, though seeing the way to harmonize many different perspectives is not always easy, and it is important that the perspectives of distant others not drown out one’s concern for those close to one. At the idealized extreme, a sage is able to appropriately honor all relevant perspectives.

This leads me back to what I called “the political problem.” The problem is not that a sage could “contribute to problematic politics,” as Harris puts it. The political
problem is instead that by conceiving of politics as ethics-writ-large, Confucians are in a particularly poor situation when rulers turn out not to be sages. The ideal of the sage-king tempts actual rulers to think of themselves as possessing excellent, or even infallible, ethical judgment as well. This is the route from the sage ideal to despotism, and alas it has been a well-trodden route in Chinese history, both ancient and modern. Of course I grant that things are more complicated than this brief sketch allows—on which see chapter 10 of Sagehood—but the key point is that a solution to the political problem requires a significant adjustment to the Confucian conception of politics. The participation of the community, which Harris stresses, is indeed important, but I argue that what is really needed is for politics norms (like laws and rights) to become partly independent from ethical judgments.

Rehearsing the details of that argument would take me too far afield, so let me conclude with a few words about virtue ethics. Some of Harris’s comments allude to the on-going debate within Western moral philosophy about the definition, scope, and independence of virtue ethics as a theory type. Over the last two or three decades we have learned (or been reminded) both that virtue and related ideas play significant roles in many deontological and consequentialist frameworks, and that virtue-centered theories have and can be developed in many more ways than simply following Aristotle. In addition, various kinds of care ethics and role ethics have emerged, each sharing some ground with virtue ethics but each making relationality more central than it has been for most virtue ethicists. In this context (and given the importance of relationality for all Confucians), challenges like Harris’s are natural and stimulating, even if I find this particular version unpersuasive. In my judgment, we both learn more about Neo-
Confucianism, and engage in more fruitful dialogue with contemporary thought, when we see Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming as developing distinctive varieties of virtue ethics, but this conversation is a long way from being over.