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A Productive Dialogue: Contemporary Moral Education and Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The essay asks whether contemporary Western empirical studies of moral education, as exemplified in the distinctive research programs of Lawrence Kohlberg and Martin Hoffman, can enter into productive dialogue with the Neo-Confucian theories of Zhu Xi (1130-1200). The proposed dialogue proceeds in two stages. I begin with Zhu's notion of "lesser learning" and the role therein of ritual, and consider their relations to Kohlberg's ideas about the construction of moral rules and Hoffman's findings concerning parental discipline (and particularly "induction"). The second stage turns to Zhu's "greater learning" and its central concept of reverence, which I explain is best understood as the mental framework through which one naturally attends to particular things in their full embeddedness within universal Coherence. I compare these ideas to Kohlberg on "decentering" and Hoffman on interrelatedness, among other topics. Throughout the essay I demonstrate ways in which contemporary scholars seeking to develop the ideas of Kohlberg or Hoffman have good reason to attend to Zhu Xi's insights, as well as respects in which contemporary Confucians should see Western studies of moral education as sources of stimulating challenges and helpful resources. The dialogue, I conclude, is indeed productive.

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I. Introduction

The contemporary academic study of moral development, and the closely allied study of moral education are flourishing enterprises. Researchers and theoreticians strive to understand the psychological capacities that underlie human moral behavior and to develop techniques that encourage the robust development of these capacities. The results of their research programs should be of great interest to philosophers focused on any of the various approaches to ethics that are emerging today. Any plausible ethical theory must meet Flanagan's "minimal psychological realism" condition, which states that the psychology required by a moral theory must be realized in principle,[1] and an understanding of human capacities for moral development is surely relevant. At the same time, insofar as an ethical tradition like Neo-Confucianism has been ignored by psychological researchers, bringing the two into contact offers the opportunity for a fascinating kind of test: are the two able to enter into a productive dialogue? If not, then we might worry that the contemporary psychological research is hopelessly Eurocentric, or that Neo-Confucianism is no more than an erstwhile ideology with little connection to the way that humans actually are. Happily, my conclusion here is that productive dialogue is in the offing, though in this essay I will only be able to scratch the surface of the opportunities afforded by such a dialogue. My

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focus will be on two practices that are central to Neo-Confucian conceptions of moral education, namely ritual and reverence. As I elaborate on their significances, I will comment on the ways in which contemporary moral psychology can learn from the Neo-Confucians, as well as on the ways in which contemporary heirs of Neo-Confucianism might learn from the psychologists.

Before delving into ritual and reverence, let me begin by sketching what I am referring to as contemporary research in moral development and its links to moral education. This is a potentially vast terrain; for present purposes, I limit myself to two broad research agendas, namely those focused on the development of cognitive capacities for moral judgment, on the one hand, and those which stress affective capacities (particularly empathy), on the other hand. The former is most closely associated with the names of Piaget and Kohlberg; a pioneer in the latter field is Martin Hoffman.[2] As far as moral education goes, I will limit myself here to the approaches to moral education that are indicated by these two understandings of moral development.

Very roughly, we might characterize the two approaches as follows. Piaget and Kohlberg were both impressed by an analogy they saw between the childhood development of non-moral judgments (e.g., about matters of logical consistency) and moral judgments. In both cases, they observed development from self-centered and superficial judgments to "decentered" judgments that are based on standards the children have "constructed" through interaction with peers and with the world.[3] Reacting against the Durkheimian idea that moral norms are simply internalized social norms, Piaget and Kohlberg see morality as centrally concerned with motives like those provided by pure cognition of rules of reciprocity that children discover for themselves. In contrast, Hoffman and his associates have argued that empathy — which is expressed in many modes, some of them active even in newborn children — is the core source of moral motivation;

moral maturation does gradually involve the adoption of moral principles (like justice and care) but it is critical that these principles are infused with empathetic affect. For Hoffman, the most important step in moral education is the role played by parents to discipline their children, which leads the children to "internalize" moral norms. More particularly, he believes that a type of discipline encounter he calls "induction" is most important. In an induction, parents highlight the distress of another, which helps children to develop "scripts" in which they move from recognition of a transgression to empathetic distress and guilt.[4] It should be apparent that these two research programs take quite different approaches. They do share an emphasis on the importance of seeing or taking another's perspective, though, and various efforts have been made to reconcile their disparate findings.[5]

II. Neo-Confucian Ritual and "Lesser Learning"

Like other Neo-Confucians, Zhu Xi was a strong critic of most educational practices in his day. Zhu has long been identified with text-based learning and with the civil service examination system, preparation for which dominated the education of countless children until its abandonment in 1905. To be sure, Zhu did believe that reading plays a critical role in personal cultivation. However, he also worried that "preparing for the examinations has ruined so many people."[6] All too many students merely learn to express the ideas of the sages on paper, rather than making them matters of "personal concern." Zhu believed that preparation for the examinations could take place alongside a commitment to self-improvement, so long as one's commitment to self-improvement occupied the lion's share of one's effort.[7] In practice, this meant developing education curricula that would focus on the individual's dispositions,

commitment, and understanding, rather than on filling students' heads with memorized texts and endless facts. As Zhu put it, "The ancients simply attended to the mind, and this culminated in the good governance of the empire — everything flowed from the mind. People today only attend to the [many] matters."[8]

Zhu believed that the ancients had correctly understood that education must proceed in stages. "Lesser learning" instructs students in activities ranging from cleaning and etiquette to the "six arts" of the ancient noble culture. To some degree these matters are important in their own right, but their real significance lies in their role in a broader process. Zhu says: "Lesser learning is the direct understanding of a given affair. Greater learning is the investigation of a given Coherence — the reason why an affair is as it is."[9] In a similar vein, he says that "Lesser learning is the study of affairs — such as serving one's ruler, serving one's father, serving one's brother, and dealing with one's friends. It teaches one to behave according to certain rules. Greater learning illuminates the Coherence behind these affairs."[10]

These two passages are both revealing and complementary. As one first begins to learn the proper way to perform rituals, to engage in polite conversation, to clean and sweep, one follows explicit instructions. Often one is awkward and rigid, only knowing to follow the precise instructions one has been given and unsure how to proceed if one finds oneself in a slightly novel situation. Your father's papers are strewn around his desk; do you straighten them in order to dust? Your mother's colleague has asked you some rather personal questions at dinner; do you have to answer? Gradually, one develops a "direct understanding (*zhi lihui* 直理會)" of the activities so that one can begin to perform them more flexibly. Zhu says that "the lesser learning of the ancients instructed people in affairs and therefore nurtured their minds naturally; without even becoming aware of it, they became good."[11]

These passages raise two important questions, however. First is the question of what sort of nurturing is going on: is it really that only through lesser learning are the students *becoming* good? This sounds very different from the general idea of Neo-Confucians that our natures are fully formed and good — needing no development.[12] The second question is what, exactly, greater learning adds? Zhu's talk of "the reasons behind the affairs" can make it sound like greater learning produces a theoretical understanding, on the basis of which fully cultivated individuals can make correct judgments of how to act. Is that the correct understanding of how a Neo-Confucian sage responds to the world?

I will put off the second question until later, when we tackle greater learning more directly. As for the kind of development that takes place during lesser learning, let us begin with the sense in which our natures are fully formed and good. In brief, this means that we can always detect and be motivated by the satisfying harmony of a proper reaction to some situation — if only we can properly attend to the situation, clear away selfish obstacles to seeing the situation rightly, and so on. One may also need particular intellectual knowledge in order to properly understand the significance of what one is seeing. We see hints of this "good nature" in our spontaneous reactions to certain paradigm circumstances, such as Mencius's famous example of our feeling compassion at the sight of a baby about to crawl into a well. According to Neo-Confucians, these are not rudimentary reactions that need to be grown, but windows into our actual, existing nature.[13] We need to develop dispositions to look for harmony rather than developing our ability to detect and feel satisfied by harmony (or Coherence) itself, since this latter ability is innate. Both aspects contribute to full-blown virtue.[14]

Given such an understanding of our natures, lesser learning has several related functions. First, it provides a structured context in which we are helped to see those of our natural reactions

to which we might not otherwise attend adequately. Training in rituals is especially useful here. "Ritual" here does not just mean a formal ceremony, but covers all the multifarious social norms that govern how we interact with one another; in our contemporary world, we see rituals in this sense in situations as diverse as family meals, greetings between strangers, and committee meetings. Although there is some truth in the well-known argument of David Hall and Roger Ames that the full performance of ritual expresses a kind of personal creativity, we must remember that especially at the beginning, ritual is a form of discipline. External authorities — parents, older siblings, teachers, texts — instruct one in what to wear, how to position one's body, where to look, and on and on. Sometimes the teaching is explicit, and sometimes more implicit, through modeling. This disciplining process has two distinct aspects.

On the one hand, it provides focus. It puts us in the best possible position to attend to the natural reactions of our heart-minds to particularly significant situations. Second, Neo-Confucians would acknowledge that there is a kind of transformation that is necessary, a disciplining our physical-cum-emotional selves. From the classical period on, Confucians have seen body, mind, and heart as continuous with one another. Neo-Confucians expressed this through the theory of "*qi*," which one translator renders as "psycho-physical stuff."[15] We are made up of *qi*, parts of which can be more or less "pure." The key point to notice here is that the theory of *qi* is not best understood as establishing a dualism between good mind (or soul) and bad body. Rather, mind-and-heart (*xin* 心) are embodied, and the body has both good reactions and, at least at the beginning of one's cultivation, bad or inapt reactions. A third function of ritual, and lesser learning more generally, is to keep us from what I will call "moral danger": not only does lesser learning put us into positive contexts, but it also keeps us from negative ones in which temptations to selfish behavior abound. Fourth, through the practices introduced in lesser

learning we are initiated into (and actually help to recreate) critical communities that will help to sustain our ethical education — even as we help to articulate the precise shape and point of these communities through our participation in them. Finally, the fifth function we can assign to lesser learning is rousing our intention to cultivate ourselves.

A final remark to make about lesser learning is that Zhu does not necessarily see it as a fundamentally distinct phase that must come before anything that could count as "greater learning." Some of his comments and some of the content of lesser learning suggest a degree of overlap, especially as it regards the practice of reverence (*jing* 敬). Reverence is critical to greater learning, but its gradual development can also play a valuable role in lesser learning. Thus Zhu says, for example, that in these benighted days without explicit instruction in lesser learning, "only if [students] are taught to regard reverence as central and to discipline their bodies and minds will they be capable of making the proper effort."[16]

III. Dialogue (1)

Let us turn now to the question of in what ways we might take the foregoing account as comment or criticism on contemporary theories of moral education, and to the complementary question of how contemporary theorists might respond to Neo-Confucian views of ritual and lesser learning. This dialogue has the potential to ramify in many directions, especially if we focus on the developmental as well as educational aspects of the comparison. For present purposes, therefore, I will have to be quite selective in my choice of topics for discussion.

As I briefly explained above, the Piaget/Kohlberg approach attends closely to the ways in which children "construct" moral rules to which they then feel obligated; they perceive these

rules as having a kind of necessity that the theorists explicitly analogize to logical necessity, and therefore feel a cognitively derived motive to act or desist from acting in a given way. This does not correspond very well to anything in the description of lesser learning that we have seen. Of course, we should not take it for granted that the contemporary theorists are correct.[17] In addition, the language of "construction" is somewhat unfortunate, because the basic idea is closer to the discovery or articulation of norms that are implicit in the structure of our interactions with the world and with one another. When put this way, though, the idea starts to sound much more congenial to Neo-Confucians, albeit as a process they might assign to greater learning, at least insofar as we become conscious of its functioning. Zhu Xi and others believe that we feel the motive force of the "Coherence (*li* 理)" we notice in any given situation.

Elsewhere I have argued that *li* is best understood as the valuable and intelligible way that things fit together, and that it has both subjective and objective dimensions.[18] Zhu Xi stressed the objective aspect of Coherence by saying things like "Throughout the universe there is only a settled (*ding*) and unchanging (*chang*) Coherence. This we must understand. Do not pretend for a moment that you can manipulate it, and do not assume for a moment that you can change it."[19] The key here is clearly to stress that one cannot make moral values (that is, the way of the sages) into whatever one likes. They are not simply a matter of what one happens to desire at the moment, and thus — notwithstanding the fact that the Coherence of a situation depends, in part, one one's own reactions to it — Coherence has the *feel* of something objective, choiceless. To at least some degree, in short, we can see a similarity between Kohlberg and Zhu Xi. In addition, notwithstanding many differences, both theorists also believe that there are ways to enhance the degree to which we are actually motivated by these partly-objective norms. I will look at this topic below, when I turn to greater learning and attention.

Unlike Piaget and Kohlberg, Martin Hoffman puts considerable stress on the role of parental discipline in "internalizing" moral norms. In Hoffman's understanding, disciplinary processes work best when they build on the pre-existing "prosocial" motivations that can already be found in children. In particular, Hoffman argues that from a newborn's very first days, many of the modes of interaction that collectively make up "empathy" are already present. Empathy—defined as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than to one's own"[20]—is the key to Hoffman's account of moral development and moral education. Empathy operates through several different modes, from mimicry, classical conditioning, and direct association (all of which are essentially automatic and can be found in infants) to mediated association and role-taking, which require more advanced cognitive skills. Although the several modes through which empathy operates make it quite robust, Hoffman argues that empathy on its own is often not enough to motivate a prosocial reaction after one has caused another's distress. Unlike "bystander" cases, children in "transgression" cases typically require the intervention of an adult; one of Hoffman's key contentions is that parental "inductions," in which parents "highlight the other's perspective, point up the other's distress, and make it clear that the child's action caused it," are the most constructive and important type of disciplinary encounter.[21] Hoffman argues that in general, induction has better long-term consequences than "power assertion" or "love withdrawal," which are the other two types of disciplinary encounters he considers. In particular, inductions lead to the creation of internal "scripts" leading from transgression to induction to empathetic distress and guilt, and then to reparation. After these scripts are formed — based on the ability of children to experience empathy — the children come to be able to activate the scripts themselves without parental intervention. Once this internalization has taken place,

children are much better motivated to either avoid transgressions, or at least to feel guilty and make reparations afterwards.

Juxtaposing all this to what we have seen about Neo-Confucian lesser learning leads to two different sorts of questions. I said above that according to Neo-Confucians, reactions like the one has to seeing a baby about to crawl into a well — which seems like a paradigm expression of "bystander" empathy — are not rudimentary reactions that need to be grown, but windows into our actual, existing nature; if we put this in terms of the positive satisfaction one feels from "harmony," we need to develop dispositions to look for harmony, rather than developing our ability to detect and feel satisfied by harmony itself.[22] The first question Hoffman raises for Neo-Confucians, then, is whether his developmental account fits with theirs.[23] Though this is a large question that I cannot fully deal with here, a response should begin by reiterating that Neo-Confucians agree with Hoffman that we often need to be helped to see those of our natural reactions to which we might not otherwise attend adequately. Selfish or egoistic (to use Hoffman's terminology) desires can overwhelm our prosocial reactions. Neo-Confucians recognize the need to transform our emotional-cum-bodily dispositions, so that we reliably attend to all aspects of situations, very much including our empathetic (and other prosocial) reactions. A question for further investigation is whether Hoffman has shown evidence that our empathetic reactions themselves need to be strengthened or developed in some way that is inconsistent with Neo-Confucian teachings.[24]

If we can understand inductions as fitting with Neo-Confucianism in this way, though, a second question for us is whether the Neo-Confucians have shown us important aspects of moral education that Hoffman (and Kohlberg, for that matter) have missed. What, in particular, of ritual? Previously, *-I stressed that ritual is a key form of discipline, but it is not one of the

modalities that Hoffman considers. To be sure, power assertion, love withholding, and perhaps even a form of induction might all be useful in motivating a child to participate appropriately in ritual activity. But unlike the cases Hoffman discusses, the discipline involved in learning rituals takes place through forward-looking instruction and concurrent modeling of behavior, in addition to any after-the-fact disciplinary encounters resulting from a child's failure to fully live up to the ritual demands of a given situation. Hoffman does acknowledge that research has shown that "prosocial models are good at getting children to do what they are predisposed to do";[25] he does not put more stress on this because he worries about conflict and transgression situations, in which a child's self-interest pushes against the prosocial behavior. He seems to feel that prosocial modeling is too weak to combat these tendencies toward conflict and transgression. One of the key features of ritual, however, is precisely that it keeps participants out of "moral danger": that is, it keeps us focused on the relevant prosocial motives that we actually experience. As our dispositions to actually attend to the aspects of situations emphasized by rituals develop, we will be less dependent on rituals — they will have served their educational point — but they will continue to be important as means of expressing and communicating emotions, and thus also as means of sustaining our moral communities.[26]

I suspect that Hoffman (and Kohlberg) do not speak of ritual in part because they associate it with the rigid imposition of "traditional" values which may have no connection to actually experienced prosocial motives. Neo-Confucians will argue, to the contrary, that feelings like humility, deference, and shame are also key aspects of our nature, and need to be understood as positive aspects of the virtuous personality. Ritual and related aspects of lesser learning are thus important facets of moral education that deserve more research.[27] One issue that this reflection and research will need to consider is the following speculation from Hoffman:

I would expect people to be more likely to empathize with someone else's emotion if they have had direct experience with that emotion, as this would facilitate the operation of at least three empathy-arousing mechanisms: direct association, mediated association, and role-taking…. It follows that socialization that allows children to experience a variety of emotions rather than protecting them from these emotions (hothouse flower) will increase the likelihood of children's being able to empathize with different emotions. It will expand their empathetic range.[28]

On the one hand, we might think that the way ritual protects from moral danger is precisely by treating one as a hothouse flower, and thus that Hoffman's speculation presents a challenge to the significance of ritual. On the other hand, it may be that rituals are the best way to introduce children to painful emotions like grief in ways that do not "produce empathetic over-arousal and shift one's attention from the victim to oneself, or motivate one to withdraw from the situation,"[29] which Hoffman suggests might lead to exceptions to his initial speculation. In any event, I suggest that so far we have considerable evidence to conclude that contemporary theorists and Neo-Confucianism can enter into a productive dialogue.

IV. Reverence

So far we have concentrated on relatively early stages of moral education. It is now time to turn to "Greater Learning," and in particular to the central educational practice that Zhu Xi believes can ultimately lead to sagehood. He writes: "If one succeeds in preserving reverence (*jing*), one's mind will be clear and universal Coherence will be bright. At no point is the slightest effort exerted, and at no point is the slightest effort not exerted."[30] In other words, "reverence" is said to be the key to finally achieving sagely ease — that state in which without exerting effort, one still does all one should do. At the same time, reverence has rather specific

outer manifestations, as seen in things like one's posture, expression, and behavior. As a result, the beginnings of reverence can be part of early stages of cultivation. For instance, Zhu Xi said:

> "Sit as though you were impersonating an ancestor, stand as though you were performing a sacrifice." The head should be upright, the eyes looking straight ahead, the feet steady, the hands respectful, the mouth quiet and composed, the bearing solemn — these are all aspects of reverence.[31]

The following passage imparts a similar message:

> To explain "holding on to reverence (*chijing* 持敬)" doesn't require many words. Just appreciate fully the flavor of these phrases [of Cheng Yi 程頤] — "be ordered and solemn," "be dignified and grave," "change your countenance," "set your thoughts in order," "regulate your dress and dignify your gaze" — and make a concrete effort [at doing what they say]. Then what is called [by Cheng Yi] "straightening ourselves within (*zhi nei* 直內)" and "making single-mindedness the master" naturally will require no additional measures: the mind and body will become solemn, and the manifest and hidden will become one.[32]

For Zhu these physical-cum-emotional manifestations are part of reverence. They are certainly related to the more specific requirements of ritual, which as I discussed above, also has an important role in early stages of ethical development. What makes reverence so important, though, is less these specific behaviors than their ability to deepen into a broader, multifaceted aspect of our character.

Several modern analysts have noted the multidimensional nature of reverence. The great twentieth-century intellectual historian Qian Mu 錢穆, for example, argues that Zhu Xi's notion of reverence contains six aspects: fear and respect, restraint, focus, cautiousness, clearheadedness, and tidiness and solemnity.[33] A contemporary scholar lists a different set of six aspects: "single-mindedness and freedom from distraction"; "always keep mindful alertness"; "always examine yourself"; "be attentive"; "be orderly and dignified"; and "stand in awe," which he also connects to caution and fear.[34] My argument here is that we begin to see the unity of the concept — and to see how it can be a crucial virtue, as Choi also argues — when we see how its

outer manifestations relate to its two central (inner) aspects, namely the way reverence both reveals interconnections and motivates us.

The outer aspects we have been tracking are both preparation for, and (eventually) expression of, a special sort of unified consciousness of one's situation at the moment. For some Neo-Confucians, the key to ethical development is to come to see and grasp the pure goodness within one — often, at least in part, via meditative techniques — and find a way to manifest this pure goodness in one's every feeling and action. Zhu Xi himself was tempted by such an approach, but subsequently came to see a fundamental problem with it. As he says in his famous "Letter to the Gentlemen of Hunan," "the unactualized (*weifa* 未發) state cannot be sought and the state after we are conscious [of feelings] permits no manipulation."[35] What this meant was that one could not experience feelings that had not yet been actualized — there is no introspective end-run around this conceptual truth — and yet once one has already responded to a situation, it is too late to really fix things. To be sure, one can try to suppress bad reactions and conscientiously push oneself to do the right thing.[36] However, such conscientiousness is clearly not the attitude of sagehood that Zhu has been urging all to seek.[37]

What, then, is Zhu's solution? He felt that the key was to work on the way one sees the world. If one alters the mental framework into which our feelings flow, then one can ensure they manifest themselves correctly. Insofar as one does this successfully, it will then not be necessary to engage in any conscious suppression of incipient, selfish reactions. Perhaps Zhu's most straightforward statement about the inner correlate of outer solemnity (etc.) is the following: "Don't think of reverence as some matter [outside yourself]. It's simply to collect your own mental energy and focus single-mindedly here."[38] Similarly, Zhu says that reverence is to "make single-mindedness the master without distraction."[39]

So far, so good: focus or concentration lies at the heart of reverence. But if we stop here we would need to face two questions. First, why would single-minded focus be associated with feelings like "awe" (or perhaps "fear") and expressed via "solemnity"? Doesn't this seem like an oddly worshipful attitude to take toward whatever particular thing one happens to be concentrating on? Second, elsewhere Zhu says that "If one continually practices reverence without interruption, then one will be unbiased and unreliant [on external things]; if one is always this way, one has achieved equilibrium."[40] But how is it that concentrating on a single thing, to the exclusion of all else, is supposed to have the result that one is unbiased? It might be more natural to think one would be so focused on that particular thing as to think nothing else mattered in the world: for example, in a given moment during lunch, perhaps all one is aware of is the delicious flavor of one's sandwich.

One possible answer to both these questions would be that what one is concentrating on is not the sandwich itself, but on one's feelings and other reactions that are prompted by the sandwich; and that what one is solemnly, fearfully trying to avoid is any hint of selfishness. Any thought like "Ah, I'm really glad I got the last piece of left-over turkey, instead of Dad — it is really delicious!" must be instantly squashed. Zhu says some things that lend themselves to such an interpretation, and analysts have sometimes read him in this way.[41] I think that Zhu does see the value of squashing such reactions, which he tends to discuss under the category of "subduing the self (*keji* 克己)." But this activity is a last-ditch defense, rather than what reverence itself is really about. One way to see this is from Zhu's various statements about what follows from reverence. In a particularly revealing passage, Zhu says:

> …you need to see reverence as straightening your inner phenomena. When reverent, your inner aspect will be unified, orderly, and straight; from top to bottom, there will be no selfish defects. If you are not reverent, then your inner aspect will be full of comparisons of all different kinds of things; when you act, you will always be partial [to one side or

another]. Wanting to benefit A, it will be necessary to harm B, or vice versa. How could you thusly make anyone content?[42]

Rather than being "full of comparisons," the "inner aspect" of someone advanced at reverence is unified, such that one can respond to a situation without being partial to one side or the other. This echoes the passage discussed above that connects reverence to being "unbiased" and thus achieving "equilibrium."

If reverence is not fearfully keeping watch on one's emerging feelings, though, what is it? I submit that it is attending single-mindedly to a particular thing or matter before one in all of its distinctness, which will simultaneously include being aware of the interdependence of that thing or matter with its entire context. Only by seeing it in such a thoroughly contextualized manner can one perceive the ideally harmonious response to a given stimulus; only thus does one avoid "bias." If we look at some famous, related passages, we can begin to get more of a sense of how one was to attend to particular situations in the fashion Zhu wanted. For instance, here is a statement by Cheng Hao 程顥 that Zhu endorsed:

> By calmness of nature we mean that one's nature is calm whether it is in a state of activity or in a state of tranquility. One does not lean forward or backward to accommodate things, nor does one make any distinction between the internal and the external. To regard things outside the self as external, and force oneself to conform to them, is to regard one's nature as divided into the internal and external.[43]

In a comment on this letter, Zhu says that "nature" here should be understood as "mind": one should not make a distinction in one's mind between internal and external. Similarly, he cites Zhang Zai's 張載 (1020-1077) injunction that we should avoid having a "mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself (*you wai zhi xin* 有外之心)."[44] Zhu comments:

> Someone asked what a "mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself" was. Zhu answered: That's having personal intentions (*si yi* 私意), which renders inner and outer incompatible. All such a person sees is their own self. No things are interrelated with their self. That's "a mind that [recognizes things as] outside itself."[45]

When one attends to particular things, in short, one must see them in all their inter-relationships. Seeing things (or matters, events, relationships: all these could be referred to by "thing" [物]) in their interrelationships and interdependence means seeing them amidst, or constituted by, the patterns of Coherence. Coherence operates at many levels, and ultimately even the most trivial situation is connected with all-encompassing Universal Coherence (*tianli* 天理). An advantage of understanding reverence as the mental framework under which one naturally attends to the particular thing in its full embeddedness within universal Coherence is that we see why Zhu talks of "reverence" rather than merely "focus," and why "awe" (which can sometimes feel like fear) is also part of reverence.[46] Zhu is quite explicit about the importance of this affective dimension of reverence, saying at one point that "Reverence is just the word 'awe (*wei* 畏).'"[47] He similarly describes reverence as "single-minded focus on each matter as it arises, with solemn circumspection and awe, never relaxing." The best elaboration I have found on what Zhu means by "awe" comes in his commentary on a famous passage from the *Analects*, in which Confucius says that the superior person stands in awe of the commands of heaven. Zhu comments that "awe (*wei*) means majestic fear." It is an unavoidable reaction to seeing the proper Coherence that heaven has ordained because one sees that realizing this Coherence is one's responsibility, and yet this burden — which cannot be set aside — is very great.[48] Reverence leads one to see things in all their inter-relationships, which in turn means seeing the broader possibilities for "Coherence": the life-affirming possibilities for harmony. Zhu calls this focused engagement with one's world reverence because one is fearful and yet devoted to the tasks that naturally arise. The closer one comes to sagely ease, the less one needs to devote effort to revering every instant. For most of us, though, maintaining the proper, engaged attitude takes serious effort. Zhu says to one student,

It's not that certain matters in particular distract your thinking — just enjoying the scenery leads your mind far away. How can this compare to maintaining it within at all times? To have absolutely no interest in the inconsequential matters of the world may seem unfeeling at first, but, in fact, it's best if this is the case.[49]

Nature itself can be an object of our reverence, but distraction by scenery at the wrong moment is something to be avoided.

V. Dialogue (2)

Turn now to the opportunities for dialogue that emerge from juxtaposing the account of reverence we have just seen with Kohlberg's and Hoffman's views on the more advanced stages of moral development and education. Once again we will see similarities, differences, and gaps, all of which can stimulate productive thinking and further research.

It makes sense to start with the more advanced stages or aspects discussed by Kohlberg and Hoffman. With his theory's basis in cognitive perceptions of reciprocity and justice, Kohlberg views moral progress as coming through the decentering of the self via integrating diverse perspectives with one's own. He and his followers debated and refined theories that articulate particular "stages" of moral development, one striking feature of which is that higher stages are associated with sophisticated, abstract moral thinking. In one of Kohlberg's studies that followed a group of people through time, the only subjects to reach "Stage 5" in their moral judgment all had some degree of graduate education. In fact, at one point he acknowledged that his description of "Stage 6" — the highest stage — "came from the writings of a small elite sample, elite in the sense of formal philosophical training and in the sense of its ability for and commitment to moral leadership."[50] It is worth keeping in mind here that Kohlberg's core evaluative technique is to assess the reflective responses of subjects to a variety of moral

quandaries and dilemmas. Kohlberg and others have argued that sophisticated understanding of justice issues correlates with being a mature moral agent, in part because the cognitive perception of injustice can itself motivate moral behavior, as I briefly discussed above. There have been impressive experimental and therapeutic results that come from programs designed to encourage perspective-taking (among other techniques) on the part of antisocial youths, which followers of Kohlberg have used to argue that improvement of moral judgment, and thus of moral behavior, is possible.[51]

Two related issues emerge from this summary for our consideration. On the one hand, Neo-Confucians should be encouraged that techniques encouraging subjects to consider multiple perspectives on an issue correlate with improved prosocial behavior, because the practice of reverence we canvassed above would seem likely to promote similar results. The various ways in which Neo-Confucians encourage us to *see* situations in all their interconnected complexity is certainly related to seeing them simultaneously from different perspectives. What, though, of Kohlberg's emphasis on theoretical, abstract, cognitive judgment as ultimately explaining moral behavior? Near the beginning of Section 2, I cited Zhu Xi's statement that greater learning — which we now understand to be centered on attention — leads us to understand "the reasons behind the affairs." I suppose it is natural to read this as saying that greater learning produces a theoretical understanding, on the basis of which fully cultivated individuals can make correct judgments of how to act. This also might be seen to link up to my assertions above regarding the way that perceptions of Coherence affect and motivate us like objective norms rather than as mere subjective preferences. If this is what mature (sagely?) moral experience is like, though, then it poses a challenge to the otherwise-plausible idea, for which I have argued elsewhere, that Neo-Confucianism is best understood as a virtue ethics.[52] Instead, we seem to be led toward the

conclusion that it is a species of deontological ethics, in which moral education aims at helping us discover and be motivated by the independent moral law.[53]

We need to separate two issues. First, we have seen that some sorts of decentration and perspective-taking are useful and also mesh, at least in a loose way, with Neo-Confucianism. We will shortly see, though, that there is more than one way to understand decentration. This leads to the second issue, which is whether to interpret Neo-Confucian greater learning in the abstract, cognitive way that I was just suggesting. Is it about reflective judgments, or something different? The key is understanding the role of perception, which is admittedly central to both Kohlberg and to Neo-Confucians. The latter, however, stress that moral perception is a *seeing as* that has evaluative categories built in. In exceptional circumstances even a sage might have to stop, look around, and make sure that he or she was noticing all the relevant aspects of the situation. In general, though, there is no temporal gap between seeing and forming a moral judgment. By *attending* to the situation in the right way — single-mindedly, through reverence — one is both noticing and responding to the morally salient features of the situation. Seeing and responding to Coherence is not a flat, cognitive process. Instead, Neo-Confucians argue that values are built in to the way we experience our worlds. The difference between relatively selfish people and relatively decentered people is that the latter do a better job than the former in seeing-and-responding to the world in all its relevant complexity. According to Neo-Confucians, a sage's heart-mind (*xin*) can be thought of as having a variety of affective-cum-cognitive dispositions that underlie his or her responses, or we can talk of a single, unified capacity, namely "virtue (*de* 德)." (Thus recall that reverence isn't just decentered attention; it has outer, behavioral manifestations as well as critical affective components like awe.) Neo-Confucians would criticize Kohlberg for his overly exclusive concern with cognitive motivation; instead, we are

drawn toward harmonious solutions by a number of emotional and judgmental capacities working in concert.

I do not want to suggest that there is no role, on a Neo-Confucian view, for abstract reflection, intellectual effort, or the articulation of reasons and principles. Zhu Xi did say, after all, that greater learning led one to understand "the reasons behind the affairs." There is a great deal of thinking, reading, and reflecting that go on during greater learning, as Zhu and others describe it, but this is best understood as helping us learn to how to genuinely attend to our situations. Zhu emphasizes, after all, that reading and other educational practices must be made personally relevant. In fact this is not *so* distant from Kohlberg; for him, too, a kind of personal transformation is supposed to take place, which he calls "construction." But for Neo-Confucians, principles still have a different status. Any principle one can articulate has a heuristic rather than fundamental role. They help us to notice things we should and can care about, and can serve as crutches for those of us who may be systematically blind to certain relevant aspects of situations. (One thinks here of principles regarding equality of race or gender, for instance.) What ultimately matters, though, is the development of an overall disposition to attend to each relevant, distinct aspect of our situations in all their interrelatedness. This is "virtue (*de*)."[54]

There are aspects of Martin Hoffman's writings that are congenial to the Neo-Confucian idea of interrelatedness. He describes a major goal of moral education as creating "a sense of oneness with others,"[55] by which he largely means removing or reducing the "empathic bias" through which people empathize more strongly with others with whom they identify. He also stresses that empathic distress can and should respond to another's whole life condition, rather than just his or her immediate feelings.[56] Still, in comparison to Neo-Confucianism, this dimension of Hoffman's picture is distinctly limited. The interrelations on which he focuses are

confined to interrelations with other people. At one point he describes empathy for a distressed *group* of people as "the most advanced form of empathic distress,[57] and he characterizes the "mature, prosocial morally internalized person" as the "endpoint of our analysis."[58] Even the success of such "mature" people depends on being able to restrain desires in order to avoid harming others. Unlike the most mature Neo-Confucian agents, that is, morally advanced people in Hoffman's eyes never reach the stage where the right kind of attention to whole situations — and thus the right reactions and desires — come completely spontaneously. Indeed, Hoffman has very little to say about what "oneness" might entail.

One dimension of the encounter between Hoffman and Neo-Confucians, that is, lies in seeing whether Neo-Confucian claims about the higher and broader levels of moral development can stimulate new ideas for research and practice. A second dimension would return us to the idea of "principles" on which I was focusing earlier. In Hoffman's understanding, principles are explicitly articulated and are "grounded in bodies of philosophical and religious thought that are rooted in the histories of many cultures."[59] As such, there is considerable cross-cultural disagreement on specific principles, especially on their details. He believes, though, that "care" and "justice," at least, can be seen as "ideal types" of principles that apply in varying degrees to many situations in many contexts. On this basis, he explores the way in which such principles can interact with our core empathic capacities. The crux of his view is that empathy and principles can bond with one another. Empathy gives the principles motive force; principles help to stabilize our sometimes erratic (or biased) affective reactions. The combination gives us a "stable disposition"[60] toward prosocial behavior that can activate proper responses even in the absence of situationally induced empathy.

Hoffman acknowledges that "to date, there is only modest indirect evidence for these processes,"[61] and the point on which Gibbs is most concerned to criticize Hoffman is the latter's suggestion that principles lack their own motive force.[62] The evidence that Gibbs (and Kohlberg before him) cites, though, is similarly open to multiple interpretations. In this context, the following Neo-Confucian contentions about reverence is surely relevant: (1) it is developed in part through reflection on explicit principles and past examples; (2) it undergirds a moral responsiveness that is both stable and flexible; and (3) it is explained in part by our cognitive-cum-affective attitudes toward Coherence. These ideas seem to invite motivations of the different types that Hoffman and Kohlberg, respectively, emphasize. In short, the question of what roles principles play in our moral psychology and moral development is currently very open, and Neo-Confucianism seems well-placed to participate constructively in the research and debate.

VI. Conclusion

My goal in this essay has been to suggest that Neo-Confucian views on moral psychology and moral development can enter into productive dialogue with contemporary, empirical approaches to these same questions. It is premature to anticipate in what directions this dialogue might go; I have had the more limited project of showing that there is both ample overlap, and ample disagreement, for the dialogue to be stimulating. Philosophers seeking to develop contemporary Confucianism should be attentive to what psychologists are learning, just as philosophers working out of other traditions should be. Psychologists would do well to realize that the horizons of their research programs are significantly limited, insofar as they fail to attend

to the perspectives of a tradition like Neo-Confucianism. Neither of these assertions is meant to imply that all research must lead toward a single goal, but rather to suggest more modestly that openness to other orientations is likely — at least in a case like this, in which adequate overlap has been demonstrated — to lead to progress, as progressed is viewed from each of our starting points.

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[1] Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

[2] See, for example, Jean Piaget (M. Gabain, Tr.), *Moral Judgment of the Child*. New York: Free Press, 1965; Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development, Volume Two: The Psychology of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984; and Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Carol Gilligan is another very important voice in this domain; see Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

[3] A helpful summary of these themes is found in John C. Gibbs, *Moral Development & Reality: Beyond the Theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003.

[4] See Hoffman, *Empathy*, especially ch. 6.

[5] In different ways, both Hoffman, *Empathy*, and Gibbs, *Moral Development*, attempt reconciliations.

[6] Zhu Xi (Daniel K Gardner, Tr.), *Learning to Be a Sage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 191.

[7] Zhu says that 70 percent toward self-improvement and 30 percent toward examinations should be fine, though he adds that "What the Sage taught others was nothing but self-improvement." Zhu, *Learning*, 191.

[8] Zhu, *Learning*, 89.

[9] Zhu, *Learning*, 90. "Coherence" is my translation of "*li*," often rendered as "principle" or "pattern." I discuss this key idea further below, in Section 3. For a more thorough treatment, see Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, ch. 2.

[10] Zhu, *Learning*, 93.

[11] Zhu, *Learning*, 93.

[12] See Ivanhoe's helpful discussion of various models of cultivation in Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000; he characterizes Zhu Xi as endorsing a "recovery" model, and Wang Yangming as advocating a "discovery" model.

[13] Zhu Xi 朱熹, 《四书章句集注》 [*Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*]. Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 1987, 43.

[14] For more argument defending this interpretation, see Angle, *Sagehood*.

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[16] Zhu, *Learning*, 93.

[17] For example, there is some ground for skepticism concerning the role Piaget and Kohlberg assign to free play among young peers in the construction of moral norms Hoffman, *Empathy*.

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[19] Zhu Xi 朱熹, 《續近思錄》 [*Further Reflections on Things at Hand*]. Shijie Shuju, 1974, 24; translation from Zhu Xi (Allan Wittenborn, Tr.), *Further Reflections on Things at Hand*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1991, 68, slightly modified. See also [Angle, *Sagehood*, esp. ch. 2.

[20] Hoffman, *Empathy*, 4.

[21] Hoffman, *Empathy*, 143.

[22] Here and elsewhere in my discussion, Western moral philosophers will detect an intersection with contemporary debates about whether moral reasons are "internal" or "external." Without going into too much detail, we can see that Neo-Confucians occupy an interesting middle ground between the two positions. On the one hand, the objectivity of Coherence shares certain attractive features with externalism, but on the other hand, each of us can feel satisfied by (and thus be motivated by) harmony/Coherence, so long as we are brought to attend to it properly, which is a central feature of an internalist view. For basic discussion of these terms and for references to the extensive literature, see Stephen Finlay and Mark Schroeder, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/reasons-internal-external/]. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

[23] A related question is whether Hoffman's theory might fit better or worse with the perspective of a classical Confucian like Mengzi.

[24] One issue that will need attention is the occasional use in both neo-Confucian and some classical Confucian writings of the ideal of a "child's mind." Intriguingly, one can read Hoffman as providing evidence that newborns do, in fact, have a sort of ideal moral consciousness. Discussing the reactive cry of a newborn, Hoffman says that they their empathy can connect to others because "the 'other' to which the newborn is responding is probably sensed by the newborn as connected to the 'self,' that is, as part of the same global psychological entity as the self" (Hoffman, *Empathy*, 65-6). As infants develop, "confusions" (*Ibid*, 69) like this become rarer. Without wanting to dispute the idea that a developing sense of self-as-opposed-to-other is, indeed, a development, it is easy enough to see the "child's mind" as representing an immature form of the ideal realized in sages.

[25] Hoffman, *Empathy*, 142.

[26] See Bryan W. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. NewYork: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 112 and especially note 81.

[27] See Bryan W. Van Norden, "The Virtue of Righteousness in Mencius." In Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong, (Eds.), *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, and Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics*, Ch. 4.V.B, for excellent discussion of "shame" in the context of classical Confucianism.

[28] Hoffman, *Empathy*, 288.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Translation adapted from Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, 606-607.

[31] Zhu, *Learning*, 172, slightly altered. The quotation and content of the second sentence are both from the *Book of Rites*, 1.8a and 30.23a-b, respectively.

[32] Zhu, *Learning*, 171-2.

[33] Qian Mu 錢穆. 《朱子新學案》 [*Master Zhu: New Studies*]. Taibei: Sanmin Shuju, 1989, vol. 2, 298f.

[34] Suk Choi, "Chu Hsi on *Ching* (Reverence 敬): Virtue or Not?" Unpublished.

[35] Zhu Xi 朱熹, 《朱子文集》 [*Collected Writings*], vol. 64, 28b-29b; translation adapted from Chan, *Sourcebook*, 601.

[36] The initial reactions of Iris Murdoch's "M" offer an example of this; see Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection." In *The Sovereignty of the Good*. New York: Routledge, 1970.

[37] For Zhu's changing attitudes, see Liu Shu-hsien, "On Chu Hsi's Search for Equilibrium and Harmony." In Liu Shu-hsien, and Henry Allinson (Eds.), *Harmony and Strife: Contemporary*

Perspectives, East and West. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1988; for considerable discussion of Zhu's understanding of the psychological background to this problem, and an earlier effort at analyzing his solution, see Stephen C. Angle, "The Possibility of Sagehood: Reverential Concentration and Ethical Perfection in Zhu Xi's Thought." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 25:3 (1998). I have greatly benefited from Choi's subtle critique of my earlier analysis.

[38] Zhu, *Learning*, 174, somewhat altered.

[39] Cited in Choi, "Chu Hsi."

[40] Zhu Xi 朱熹, 《朱子语类》 [*Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*]. Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 1997, vol. 96.

[41] See, in particular, Zhu's analogizing reverence to someone guarding a door [Zhu, *Learning*, 119-20. Donald Munro writes that this image "suggests an ever alert state in which one is always mindful of the prospective mesh between an emerging sentiment and the demands of the rules of conduct"; see Donald Munro, *Images of Human Nature: A Sung Portrait*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, 127. See also [Choi, "Chu Hsi" and my earlier discussion in Angle, "Possibility." There is evidence in this very passage against understanding Zhu as straightforwardly telling us to guard the door, however, since he says that ideal reverence will have the result that there are no "depravities" against which to guard, no "self" to be subdued. But how can this be, if reverence involves the post-facto suppression of problematic feelings as they emerge into consciousness?

[42] Zhu, *Classified Conversations,* vol. 44, p. 46b; Qian, *New Studies*, vol. 2, 331.

[43] Cheng Hao 程颢 and Cheng Yi 程颐. 《二程集》 [*Collected Works of the Cheng Brothers*]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981, 34-5; translation from [Chan, *Sourcebook*, p. 39].

[44] Zhang Zai 張載. 《張載集》 [*Collected Works of Zhang Zai*]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1978, 24.

[45] Zhu Xi 朱熹,《朱子全書》 [*Complete Works of Master Zhu*], vol. 44, p. 13a.

[46] Some scholars have in fact translated *jing* as "seriousness" or "inner mental attentiveness," both of which miss this aspect of the concept. See Chan, *Sourcebook,* and Zhu, *Learning*. Gardner believes that "attentiveness" captures "reverence"; see Daniel K. Gardner, "Attentiveness and Meditative Reading in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism." In Wei-ming Tu and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Eds.), *Confucian Spirituality, Volume Two*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004: 99-119, 116n12.

[47] Zhu *Classified Conversations*, 188.

[48] See *Analects* 16:8. Zhu's comments are in Zhu *Classified Conversations*, 124.

[49] Zhu *Learning*, 174.

[50] Gibbs, *Moral Development*, 68.

[51] Gibbs, *Moral Development*, ch. 7.

[52] Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy,* Chapter 3.

[53] In fact, as far as someone like the contemporary psychologist John Gibbs (who has striven to integrate the work of Kohlberg and Hoffman) is concerned, distancing Confucianism from virtue ethics can only be good for Confucianism, because Gibbs worries that virtue ethics is problematically relativistic; see Gibbs, *Moral Development*, 4.

[54] Contrary to Gibbs's assertion that virtue ethics is relativistic, Neo-Confucian virtue ethics has a strong objective dimension. Neo-Confucians would endorse the words of contemporary Western philosopher Christine Swanton when she says we are responding to the "demands of the

world," which we do not invent Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2003.

55 Hoffman *Empathy*, 294.

56 Ibid., *Empathy*, 83.

57 Ibid., *Empathy*, 85.

58 Ibid., *Empathy*, 141.

59 Ibid., *Empathy*, 222.

60 Ibid., *Empathy*, 241.

61 Ibid., *Empathy*, 241.
62 Gibbs, *Moral Development*, 113-16.