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# Seeing Confucian 'Active Moral Perception' in Light of Contemporary Psychology

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## Seeing Confucian ‘Active Moral Perception’ in Light of Contemporary Psychology

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### I. Introduction

A central goal of my 2009 book *Sagehood* was to demonstrate the value of putting Neo-Confucian thinkers like Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529) into dialogue with contemporary Western philosophers.<sup>1</sup> I argued there that on a range of topics—from the scope and motivation for ethics, to understanding and responding to moral conflicts, to moral perception, to ethical education—Western philosophers could learn from Zhu and Wang, and the contemporary heirs of the Neo-Confucians could learn from their Western counterparts. In *Sagehood* I also dipped into some recent psychological literature on the lives and psychology of moral exemplars, which I used to challenge and enrich my account of Neo-Confucian moral education. Given that Neo-Confucians are particularly concerned to understand what we now call “moral psychology,” I reasoned, it makes sense to see what comes from examining their accounts of development and functioning of the “heartmind (*xin*)” in light of empirical studies.<sup>2</sup> The present paper has a similar motivation. As I have continued to read both psychological literature and the works of philosophers who are engaged with psychologists (including Nancy Snow’s important *Virtue as Social Intelligence*), it has struck me how much common ground

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in a more recent article, I juxtaposed themes from Zhu Xi’s account of moral education with the work of psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and Martin Hoffman, showing that contemporary scholars seeking to develop the ideas of Kohlberg or Hoffman have good reason to attend to Zhu Xi’s insights, and also arguing that contemporary Confucians should see Western studies of moral education as sources of stimulating challenges and helpful resources. See Stephen C. Angle, “A Productive Dialogue? Contemporary Moral Education and Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 Supplement s1 (2011): 183–203.

there is between certain contemporary research programs and the feature of Neo-Confucian philosophizing that I call “active moral perception.”

By bring out the homologies between these two very different bodies of theory, I believe that progress can be made toward a whole series of objectives. To begin with, it is valuable to emphasize the new directions in which post-Kohlberg moral psychological research is moving. Second, one reason that Kohlberg and his followers were not friendly to an emphasis on virtues was the possibilities for relativism that a virtue approach seemed to open up.<sup>3</sup> The new research I will be discussing is much friendlier to virtue ethics but also more open to cultural differences. Since Neo-Confucianism offers a culturally distinctive set of moral psychological categories and narratives about exemplars, this gives us an opportunity to reflect on whether a problematic form of relativism has emerged.

I will show here that many hundreds of years ago, Chinese philosophers had at least some of the insights that are now being unpacked and tested by psychologists, and furthermore that the Neo-Confucians articulated an ethical theory that meshes well with these insights. Given this, and also given that the Neo-Confucians are working out of a tradition that is many ways different from Western traditions, we might expect that the Neo-Confucians can offer novel and perhaps challenging perspectives from which contemporary philosophers and psychologists can learn. I will suggest that this is indeed the case. At the same time, I will argue that attention to contemporary psychology is extremely valuable for the further development of contemporary Confucian ethics. For some—especially those influenced by the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909-1995)—this will be my most controversial claim, but by

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<sup>3</sup> John C. Gibbs, *Moral Development and Reality: Beyond the Theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 4.

showing the ways in which Neo-Confucian philosophy and current psychology are converging, I hope to suggest a fruitful direction for the reinterpretation and further development of Confucianism.

## II. The Post-Kohlbergian Turn Toward Moral Identity

Lawrence Kohlberg was the dominant force in psychological research into human moral functioning for several decades. Indeed, he is largely credited with initiating empirical psychological research into the subject. Drawing on Piaget's theories of childhood cognitive development and on a reading of Kant's moral philosophy, Kohlberg's research program focused on stages of development in moral reasoning. Unless a given behavior was motivated by an explicit moral judgment, in fact, Kohlberg and his colleagues denied that it had any moral status.<sup>4</sup> By the 1980s, though, both problems with Kohlberg's approach and alternative paradigms were emerging. Martin Hoffman had argued that moral emotions—and, in particular, empathy—were vital to moral functioning.<sup>5</sup> Augusto Blasi showed that there exists what he called a “judgment-action gap”: sophisticated moral reasoning turned out to be only weakly correlated with actual moral action.<sup>6</sup> Blasi therefore concluded that the story had to be more complex than Kohlberg allowed, and hypothesized that moral self-identity, including the

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<sup>4</sup> Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley, “The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise,” in *Character Psychology and Character Education*, ed. Daniel K. Lapsley and F. Clark Power (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Martin L. Hoffman, “Moral Development,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, ed. P. Mussen (New York: John Wiley, 1970), 261–361.

<sup>6</sup> Augusto Blasi, “Bridging Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *Psychological Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (1980): 1–45. See also Augusto Blasi, “Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Theoretical Perspective,” *Developmental Review* 3 (1983): 178–210.

“readiness to interpret the world in moral terms,”<sup>7</sup> may be an important aspect of our overall moral functioning.<sup>8</sup> Darcia Narvaez and Daniel Lapsley, two psychologists whose work has built on Blasi’s insight, have diagnosed the problem wrought by Kohlberg’s dominance as stemming from “adopting a particular philosophical tradition as our starting point,” which led to “philosophical objections [being] improperly used to trump the empirical claims of a theory.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than such a “moralized psychology,” they prefer a “psychologized morality” that is open to a wide range of psychological approaches.<sup>10</sup>

I will revisit some of these broad, methodological claims later in the essay. For now, let us focus on the approach Blasi initiated – namely, theory and research built around the idea of moral personality and identity. In particular, I want to look at how researchers have followed up on his suggestion that “readiness to interpret the world in moral terms” might be important because this turns out to resonate strongly with the neo-Confucian understanding of moral perception. One important source of inspiration has been the work of John Bargh and colleagues on “automaticity.”<sup>11</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley argue that one has a “moral character” to the extent that “moral schemas are chronically accessible for social information processing,”<sup>12</sup> which they understand primarily in terms of Bargh’s category of “preconscious automaticity.” Narvaez and

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<sup>7</sup> Augusto Blasi, “Bridging Moral Cognition,” 40.

<sup>8</sup> Sam A. Hardy, “Identity, Reasoning, and Emotion: An Empirical Comparison of Three Sources of Moral Motivation,” *Motivation and Emotion* 30, no. 3 (2006): 205–213 is an empirical analysis of three different sources of moral motivation: identity, empathy, and moral reasoning. In Hardy’s research, identity and empathy, but not moral reasoning, were positively correlated with overall prosocial behavior.

<sup>9</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley, “The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise,” 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Bargh, “Conditional Automaticity: Varieties of Automatic Influence in Social Perception and Cognition,” in *Unintended Thought*, ed. James S. Uleman and John A. Bargh (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 3–51.

<sup>12</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley, “The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise,” 146.

Lapsley point out that a key feature of moral exemplars that is noted by Colby and Damon<sup>13</sup> (among others) is the exemplars' experience of moral action as necessary: they see the moral course of action as obvious rather than as one among other alternatives.<sup>14</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley write, "any theory that attempts to explain the exemplary behavior of 'moral saints' along with more prosaic forms of moral identity necessarily requires a specification of the social-cognitive sources of preconscious automaticity"<sup>15</sup>

Narvaez and Lapsley recognize that Bargh has identified other forms of automaticity and see some significance to both postconscious and goal-dependent automaticity, but their main focus is simply on chronically accessibly moral schema no matter what the exact mechanisms of acquisition and activation might be.<sup>16</sup> In a subsequent paper, they write, "The source of individual differences in construct accessibility lies in the particularities of each person's unique developmental history."<sup>17</sup> Their methodology in this latter paper is to identify moral "chronics" and then empirically demonstrate that they are more likely than non-chronics to make spontaneous moral inferences and employ moral categories to evaluate characters in narratives.

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Colby and Damon William, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Moral philosophers who have commented on the feeling of necessity attending the behavior of moral exemplars include Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of the Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), 1–45; Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); and Joel Kupperman, *Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley, "The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise," 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–147.

<sup>17</sup> Darcia Narvaez, Daniel K. Lapsley, Scott Hagele, and Benjamin Lasky, "Moral Chronicity and Social Information Processing: Tests of a Social Cognitive Approach to the Moral Personality," *Journal of Research in Personality* 40 (2006): 968.

Their tentative conclusion is that “chronically accessible moral schemas dispose one to ‘see’ readily the moral dimensions of experience.”<sup>18</sup>

In her recent book, moral philosopher Nancy Snow emphasizes Bargh’s category of “goal-dependent automaticity” in order to explain habitual virtuous behavior.<sup>19</sup> Snow stresses that “for a mature agent to be considered truly virtuous, virtuous actions must be performed for the right reasons, that is, with the appropriate motivation.”<sup>20</sup> I take it that this is the main reason for Snow’s focus on goal-dependent automaticity: since the automatic actions are dependent on a “virtue-relevant goal,” they can be justified as fully virtuous actions, despite not having been consciously chosen. The practical rationality of such virtuous actions can be seen in their amenability to post-facto reflective endorsement: “reflecting on the virtuous habits she has acquired, [the agent] should be able to honestly and intelligibly link them with her own virtue-relevant goals [e.g., being just], even though she is not conscious of her reasons for acting when she acts.”<sup>21</sup>

Based on my understanding of Bargh’s categories of automaticity, I want to suggest that they differ from one another primarily in the way they are caused (in Bargh’s terms, they differ in terms of “necessary preconditions”), but at least as ideal types, will not differ from one another in the ways they are justified or experienced.<sup>22</sup> Preconscious automaticity may have a variety of origins—on which more later—but it seems every bit as amenable to post-facto

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 981. Another related dimension of moral chronicity is what Gibbs calls “field independence” (*Moral Development and Reality*, 119): the ability to see things veridically notwithstanding cognitive or social pressures to do otherwise (e.g., optical illusions or peer pressure). Gibbs discusses ways in which primed moral schemas (in “high-commitment participants”) can overcome prejudicial stimuli (Ibid., 125).

<sup>19</sup> Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>22</sup> Bargh, “Conditional Automaticity,” 10.

reflective endorsement as either of the other types of automaticity. As for postconscious automaticity, the same should be true. Post-conscious automaticity takes place when conscious focusing on (for example) a moral concept has subsequent consequences that are generated automatically and outside of conscious awareness; the activation of a moral concept can “reverberate throughout the cognitive system.”<sup>23</sup> I speculate that only when the automaticity breaks down to some degree—one might find the need to question the results of a preconsciously shaped perception, re-prime a post-conscious process, consciously and deliberately support the goal associated with goal-dependent automaticity, and so on—will the different causal preconditions leak into the phenomenology.

If moral chronicity is important – a conclusion that the neo-Confucians, in their own way, will reinforce –then it will be important to determine how one comes to be a ‘moral chronic’: How does one acquire the relevant cognitive-affective schemas, goals, commitments, and so on, and how do they become so readily accessible that the various automatic processes described above are enabled? This is a large research area but a few points are worth noting, as they will connect up with aspects of the Neo-Confucian account we will examine in the next section. First, one theme within moral development research is the importance of “warm, responsive parenting in early life”<sup>24</sup>; a complementary idea is that “‘committed compliance’ on the part of the child to

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<sup>23</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley, “The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise,” 144 and Bargh, “Conditional Automaticity,” 15–17. It would be interesting to explore to what degree the effects of Iris Murdoch’s idea of “attention,” which is supposed to influence the way one automatically perceives a given individual, might be explained via postconscious automaticity. Be this as it may, once again the phenomenology of the automatic effects (for example, Murdoch’s M subsequently “just seeing” various aspects of D’s behavior as socially appropriate) will be the same as in either of the other two cases. See Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection.”

<sup>24</sup> Darcia Narvaez, “Triune Ethics Theory and Moral Personality,” in *The Moral Personality*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146.



the norms and values of caregivers...motivates moral internalization.”<sup>25</sup> Others emphasize that immersion in good relationships and communities are key to fostering the intuitions that lead to moral chronicity.<sup>26</sup> In all these cases, the researchers are describing mechanisms of moral growth that do not depend on the learners consciously seeking to internalize anything. A second theme, though, is that conscious cultivation also plays an important role, though typically at later ages (adolescence and young adulthood, in particular). Snow writes of the way in which compassion can be recognized as domain-dependent, leading one to aim at “extending” one’s compassion more globally. She says that this “is not an easy process,” requiring “introspection and the deliberate training of [one’s] capacities for affect, perception, and response.”<sup>27</sup> An emerging psychological literature aims to flesh out how these various kinds of training might work and to engage in empirical testing of their effectiveness; I discuss some of this briefly below, in Section IV.

Because of differences at every level from the genetic to the cultural, one result of the picture of the ‘moral chronic’ that I have been exploring here is the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of significant differences among the moral schemas that are chronically available to

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel K. Lapsley and Patrick L. Hill, “The Development of the Moral Personality,” in *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 199.

<sup>26</sup> Both the importance of good relationships and communities, and the negative influences of bad communities, are explored in Clark F. Power, “The Moral Self in Community,” in *Moral Development, Self, and Identity*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 47–64; Robert Atkins, Daniel Hart, and Thomas M. Donnelly, “Moral Identity Development and School Attachment,” in *The Moral Self in Community*, ed. Daniel K. Lapsley and Darcia Narvaez (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 65–82; Lapsley and Hill, “The Development of the Moral Personality;” and Daniel Hart and M. Kyle Matsuba, “Urban Neighborhoods as Contexts for Moral Identity Development,” in *The Development of the Moral Personality*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214–231.

<sup>27</sup> Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 34.

different virtuous people, and even the possibility that multiple schemas may be available to a single person. Two main sources have been put forward for the multiplicity of moral schemas: distinct, modular capacities of our brains with connections to different stages in human evolution, and cultural differences. One version of the brain-based sources of differences is Narvaez's "Triune Ethics Theory," according to which three crucial stages in human brain evolution left us with three distinct ethical orientations, each of which uses cognitive and emotional propensities to engineer moral behavior in different ways.<sup>28</sup> She sees possibilities for both conflict and for synthetic unity, as well as for shifting from one to another depending on situational contexts, though she also suggests that moral chronics will probably be more stable. Philosopher Peggy DesAutels has also argued for the existence of multiple capacities for moral perception: an "abstract" competence that focuses on high-level problem solving, and a "concrete" capacity that uses "embodied, low-level thought processes" to respond to "finely grained situations."<sup>29</sup> While DesAutels says that most adult humans have both these competences to one degree or other, her emphasis is less on possibilities for synthesis than on possibilities for gestalt-like shifting from one perspective to another, depending on the particular situation.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to brain- and development-based differences, it is unquestionable that broadly cultural factors will also lead to differences in moral schemas. This is easy enough to see just from considering the ways researchers investigate chronicity: all of the phenomena studied, from subjects' likelihood to use moral descriptions of a story to their patterns of inference, take place

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<sup>28</sup> She calls them the "SecurityEthic," which is the most primitive; the "Ethic of Engagement," which underlies the values of compassion, social harmony, and togetherness; and the "Ethic of Imagination" in which advanced moral judgment follows from the ability to coordinate a variety of evolutionarily earlier capacities. See Narvaez, "Triune Ethics Theory and Moral Personality."

<sup>29</sup> Peggy DesAutels, "Psychologies of Moral Perceivers," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 22 (1998): 266–279.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

in a particular language which makes available a given set of inferentially rich, interrelated moral concepts.<sup>31</sup> A second way that cultural distinctiveness may enter into the picture is seen in Dan McAdams's provocative three-level model of moral personality. McAdams argues that layered on top of the Big Five traits and the goals and schemas is "an emerging narrative identity—an internalized and evolving story of the reconstructed past and imagined future that aims to provide life with unity, coherence, and purpose."<sup>32</sup> His own work has focused on the "redemptive" narrative that he finds to be characteristic of Americans, but he notes that it is "quite likely that the life stories of moral exemplars in other societies do not resemble the redemptive self."<sup>33</sup> To this degree, then, he postulates that moral personalities may vary considerably, with "each culture provid[ing] its own characteristic range."

Let me conclude this section with some significant cautionary notes that have been sounded about the link Blasi and others have proposed between moral identity and moral action. David Moshman explores the ways that what he calls a "false moral identity" can be maintained through various sorts of self-serving denials of evidence and can generate deadly immorality.<sup>34</sup> Skitka and Morgan argue that attitudes experienced as strong moral convictions, which they call "moral mandates," can be variously problematic, leading to intolerance, unwillingness to compromise or accept procedural solutions, unconcern with the means used to achieve the

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<sup>31</sup> For one particularly clear example, see Narvaez et al., "Moral Chronicity and Social Information Processing." My point in mentioning the richness of the concepts is to point out that neither subjects nor researchers are confined to a 'thin' language (e.g., of 'right' and 'wrong'), which might have a greater chance of being transcultural.

<sup>32</sup> Dan P. McAdams, "The Moral Personality," in *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> David Moshman, "False Moral Identity: Self-Serving Denial in the Maintenance of Moral Self-Conceptions," in Lapsley and Narvaez, *Moral Development, Self, and Identity*, 83–109.

“mandated” end, and an erosion in trust in legal authorities.<sup>35</sup> These are the sorts of concerns that a robust ethical theory will have to find ways to counter. It is outside the scope of the present essay to look at ways that extant Western ethical theories do so, but as part of the next section we will see that Neo-Confucian theories can readily handle both types of challenges.

### III. Neo-Confucian Active Moral Perception

Chapter Seven of *Sagehood* is devoted to showing how the ease with which a Confucian sage is supposed to be able to act ethically follows from two things: a commitment to view the world as susceptible to harmony, and a resulting “active moral perception.” My main source is the great Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian master Wang Yangming; I offer my account in part as an interpretation of Wang’s famous teaching concerning the “unity of knowledge and action.” I also draw on the contemporary Confucian thinker Antonio Cua and on Western philosophers like Iris Murdoch and Larry Blum. In this section of the present paper I will summarize the idea of active moral perception and make some initial connections to the work of the psychologists discussed already.

First, a bit of background. Like most Neo-Confucians, Wang believed that the universe is structured by Universal Coherence (*tianli*), which means that there is an ideally valuable and intelligible way that all things can fit together. Furthermore, we can perceive this Coherence—both in the ways it is implicit in specific situations and in ever-greater and more complex contexts—in part because Coherence is in our own heartminds, although for various reasons we are often not cognizant of nor motivated by our reaction to Coherence. (The heartmind (*xin*) is

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<sup>35</sup> Linda J. Skitka and Scott G. Morgan, “The Double-Edged Sword of a Moral State of Mind,” in *The Dynamic Moral Self: A Social Psychological Perspective*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 355–374.

the unified seat of cognition and feeling.) Exactly how to understand Coherence (another translation for which is “principle”) is a matter of considerable controversy, both within the tradition and in contemporary scholarship. All should agree, though, that Coherence is closely linked to the idea of harmony, and that realizing Coherence (or harmony) constitutes the Way (*dao*) for humans.

In a famous *Analects* passage, Confucius’s moral development is described as progressing from a “commitment to learning” at age fifteen, through a variety of steps until, at age seventy, he was able to “follow his heartmind’s desire without overstepping the bounds.”<sup>36</sup>

Wang Yangming is recorded as having had the following conversation with a student named Tang Xu:

Tang Xu asked, “Does establishing one’s commitment (*li zhi*) mean to always preserve a good thought, and to do good and remove bad?”

[The Teacher] replied: “When a good thought is preserved, that is Universal Coherence . . . This thought is like the roots of a tree. Establishing one’s commitment is nothing other than nurturing this good thought. To be able to ‘follow his heartmind’s desire without overstepping the bounds’ is simply when one’s commitment has reached maturity (*shu*).”<sup>37</sup>

Establishing a commitment is to nurture or preserve a “good thought.” When one can do this always, one’s commitment has matured and one can act with sagely ease. Now consider the following passage:

[A student] asked about “establishing commitment.” The teacher said: “It is simply to want to preserve Universal Coherence in every thought. If one does not neglect this, in time it will naturally crystallize in one’s mind. This is like what the Daoists call “the congealing of the sage-essence.” If

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<sup>36</sup> Compare Confucius, *Analects, With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 9.

<sup>37</sup> I cite Wang Yangming’s *Record for Practice* (also translated as “*Instructions for Practical Living*”) by section number from Wang Yangming, *Instructions for Practical Living*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), §53. Translations are my own, from the Chinese original, Wang Yangming 王陽明, 傳習錄詳註集評 [*Record for Practice with Detailed Annotations and Collected Commentary*] (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1983).

the thought of Universal Coherence is always preserved, then the gradual steps to the levels of beautiful person, great person, sage, and spiritual person are all but the cultivation and extension of this one thought.<sup>38</sup>

What needs to grow, in other words, is the consistency with which we “want to preserve universal coherence in every thought”: this consistent disposition is “commitment.” As far as this passage tells us, though, Universal Coherence itself and our ability to identify it do not themselves develop. One more passage will fill out the picture:

[The Teacher said,] “When a good thought arises, recognize it and develop it fully. When a bad thought arises, recognize and stop it. Recognition and developing or stopping are commitment. This is intelligence endowed by Heaven. This is all a sage has. A student must preserve it.”<sup>39</sup>

Again, the ability to recognize whether something is good or bad—that is, whether it fits with Universal Coherence—is already present in us (“endowed by Heaven”). This is what Wang elsewhere calls “good knowing (*liangzhi*).”<sup>40</sup> What we need to develop is the reliable disposition to recognize and develop good thoughts; when this happens, our commitment has matured.

The passage we just looked at leaves open the possibility that one notices a thought, judges it to be good or bad, and then takes a further step of developing it or stopping it. If we turn to Wang’s discussion of the unity of knowledge and action, though, we will see that what he really has in mind would be better punctuated as “recognize-it-and-develop-it-fully” or “recognize-it-and-stop-it”: the recognition and the action are part of a single process. As he says, “true knowledge and action”:

...are “like loving beautiful colors and hating bad odors.” Seeing beautiful colors appertains to knowledge, while loving beautiful colors appertains to action. However, as soon as one sees that

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §16.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., §71.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., §143.

beautiful color, he has already, automatically loved it. It is not that one sees it first and then makes up one's mind to love it.<sup>41</sup>

Thus when one says one knows that one's parents should be served with filial piety but cannot put it into practice, one does not really 'know': it is not true knowledge. If one had true knowledge, then seeing one's parents would automatically bring with it the motivation to treat them with filial piety, just as seeing a beautiful flower automatically brings with it the motive to love the flower.

It is clear that 'know' is being used here in a special way, since 'true knowledge' entails more than just cognitive information. In light of the earlier passages we have considered, it is plausible to read Wang as holding that true knowledge of something is equivalent to having a mature commitment toward that thing. That is, we truly know only when we reliably want to preserve and develop good thoughts (and want to stop bad ones). I believe that Antonio Cua captures much of this when he writes that such a commitment:

... is to adopt an attitude and resolve, with one's heart and mind, to look at things and events in such a way that they can become constituents in a harmonious unity without the form of the unity being specified in advance of experience of man's confrontation with the changes in the natural world. Thus, to adopt this ideal attitude is to see human life in its morally excellent form, as possessing a coherence in which apparently conflicting elements are elements of an achievable harmonious order. The presence of conflicting elements is in experience a fact to be acknowledged. Acknowledgment brings with it a task of reconciliation.... Since the desired coherence of the moral order is not spelled out *a priori*, harmonization of the conflicting elements in experience is essentially a creative endeavor on the part of both the Confucian moral theorist and the agent.<sup>42</sup>

One's commitment ensures that one's experience of the world is not the passive noticing of moral features; one rather experiences the world as making demands on one—demands which

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., §5.

<sup>42</sup> A. S. Cua, *Moral Vision and Tradition: Essays in Chinese Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of American Press, 1998), 124–125.

may entail a kind of creativity, since Coherence is implicit in the unique situation before one, rather than being spelled out in advance.

I call this ‘active’ moral perception because of one’s motivated engagement with the process of perception. This does not mean that one is actively steering what one sees. Rather, one is ‘looking for harmony’ in the sense that one is primed to see and react favorably to opportunities for harmony. One expects “good thoughts” to be aspects of Coherence: that is, to be good because of the ways that they fit in with larger patterns of value and intelligibility. Thanks to these expectations, one is much more able to see such patterns and opportunities whenever and wherever the world offers them up. As I understand it, this is precisely a kind of moral chronicity whereby one automatically sees-and-responds to Coherence. In addition, I have been emphasizing the need for one to take on and develop a ‘commitment,’ without which one will fail to acquire ‘true knowledge.’ This, too, is a kind of ‘activity,’ but it is distinct from active moral perception itself and relies on a different sense of “active.” I will say more about the active development of this commitment, including differences among Wang Yangming, other Confucians, and current Western theorists, in the following section.

#### IV. Comparative Issues

Neo-Confucian active moral perception, I submit, has many similarities to the model of moral functioning that the contemporary psychologists discussed in Section 2 are beginning to articulate. In this final section, it is time to explore some of the issues that arise from juxtaposing these two very different traditions of inquiry and suggest ways that the psychologists (and their philosophical peers) can learn from Wang Yangming, and the heirs of Wang Yangming can learn from the psychologists.



*Shallow Knowledge*. To begin with, we might ask whether Wang Yangming’s idea of “shallow knowledge,” whereby one knows one should be (e.g.) filial towards one’s parents but does not put this into action, corresponds to anything in the psychological discussions. This connects to questions I raise at the end of *Sagehood*’s Chapter Seven, and I now feel that we make further progress. In *Sagehood* I discuss philosopher Lawrence Blum’s example of Tim. Tim encounters an ethically ambiguous situation, initially fails to notice the possible concerns, but somewhat later, ruminating on his experience, comes to see the experience in moral terms, as an instance of racism. Blum writes: “This perception of racism becomes his ‘take’ on the situation. He now sees an issue of injustice in the situation in a way he did not at first.” There is something admirable in Tim’s realization: “Prior to any action Tim might take in the situation, it is (*ceteris paribus*) a (morally) better thing for him to have recognized the racial injustice than not to have done so.”<sup>43</sup> Still, Blum emphasizes that Tim’s new perception leaves vital questions still open:

Note that seeing a situation in moral categories does not entail seeing one’s moral agency as engaged by that situation. People often see a situation as involving a wrong but not regard themselves as morally pulled to do anything about it. For example, even when Tim comes to see injustice as having taken place, he may think of that injustice as over and done with and not implying anything for him to do about it. The issue of what makes a moral being see her sense of agency as engaged by a situation—and how perception fits into this—deserves further exploration than I can undertake here.<sup>44</sup>

On the one hand, we can see Tim as arriving at a kind of shallow knowledge that racism took place, since we are imagining that he was not moved to take it up actively as a personal concern. So Wang’s category looks relevant. On the other hand, we might see Blum as posing a significant challenge to both Wang and to the contemporary psychologists who similarly

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<sup>43</sup> Lawrence A. Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity,” *Ethics* 101(1991): 706–707.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 708, n9.

emphasize the categories through which we perceive events: Can moral perception really be passive and inactive, as it is for Tim?

Wang Yangming's answer is very apt. He would say that knowledge and action have become separated because of the intrusions of selfishness. Wang holds that the default ('original') situation is one in which, when we attend to a situation and see it in value-laden terms, our perception is active, motivation is engaged, and we react. There are only two ways in which this can go wrong: when we fail to pay attention in the first place, or when the see-and-react process is disrupted by selfishness. In fact these two are closely linked. Working to deepen a commitment to learning and the Way, which we might see as focusing on the failure to pay attention, really just is the flip-side of working to remove selfishness; Wang would surely explain the failure to pay adequate attention as itself a kind of selfishness. And if we turn to the psychological literature, we will find an at least partial correlate to Wang's concern with selfishness, namely the idea of "moral disengagement." For example, Albert Bandura has explored the ways in which "The self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral conduct do not come into play unless they are activated, and there are many psychosocial maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from inhumane conduct."<sup>45</sup> If we follow Blasi in thinking that moral self and identity are part of the bedrock explanation of moral functioning, then we can deploy the idea of selfishness or disengagement to explain those times when moral knowledge is shallow and moral perception is inactive.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193.

<sup>46</sup> Seeing the self as morally, actively engaged by a situation does not mean that one sees oneself as completely responsible for resolving the situation. Elise Springer's work on the communicative and ecological dimensions of moral criticism, in which one's "taking up a moral concern" can then follow many different pathways, is extremely apt here. See Springer, *Communicating Moral Concern: An Ethics of Critical Responsiveness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

*Moral Development.* Turn now to the question of whether and how our moral functioning develops. Some of what I discussed in Section 2 will sound very congenial to Confucians: the importance of parents and, in particular, of ‘committed compliance’ with one’s parents’ values sounds a great deal like Confucian filial piety. Confucians will also like the idea that relationships and community are vital to, and even constitutive of, a good moral personality. Both classical and Neo-Confucians have much to say (although they say somewhat different things) about more conscious ethical cultivation, some of which resonates strongly with Snow’s talk of “extending” compassion (see *Mencius*).<sup>47</sup> Two themes in Section 2, though, pose significant challenges to Confucians, and especially to the Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yangming on which I have been focusing. First, if we see fully-developed moral capacity as relying on a synthesis of Narvaez’s “triune ethics” or of McAdams’s three levels, can that be squared with Wang’s confidence that one’s *liangzhi* is complete and fully-formed? (This challenge is all the greater if synthesis is impossible and we are left with distinct and incompatible options in our ethical toolkit, as DesAutels posits.) Second, some of the psychologists have suggested that we view ethical functioning as a skill that we can develop, instead of the result of a faculty or faculties that we learn to deploy. This certainly sounds very different from Wang Yangming.

In fact, P.J. Ivanhoe has recently argued that the development of an ethical sensibility is “a prolonged, complex, and at times difficult process that seems to have more in common with acquiring a skill or art than possessing a faculty.”<sup>48</sup> Part of his argument is that the analogy with

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Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Compare Mengzi, *Mengzi, With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan Van Norden (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe, “McDowell, WANG Yangming, and Mengzi’s Contributions to Understanding Moral Perception,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2011):

vision that both John McDowell and Wang Yangming employ is misleading, since, for example, “we don’t tend to believe that our understanding of redness *improves* with greater experience of red things in the way we feel our ability to understand and deal with issues surrounding what it is to really love or care for someone does.”<sup>49</sup> Whether or not this point is telling against McDowell, I think that Wang has a ready response. Wang’s claim is that seeing-and-reacting would be easy if we only looked, unclouded by selfishness. We do not have to learn to care for others or to feel pain at their suffering; we need to learn to eliminate biases and distractions—and learning that can be a prolonged, complex, and difficult process. Later in his essay, Ivanhoe acknowledges that Wang may have a somewhat easier time responding to this criticism than McDowell, but makes two further points. First, Ivanhoe says that many cases of moral failure come not from selfishness but from “a simple lack of information or enough experience”; second, that the “growth of our moral sensibilities does not feel like the spontaneous realization of a fully formed innate faculty”; he feels that it is more like the cultivation of taste by a connoisseur.<sup>50</sup> With regard to the first, I would say that Wang has no trouble with the idea that we often lack information. *Liangzhi* isn’t magic: it simply responds to situations, and responds not be magically telling us facts we don’t know, but by showing us the world (insofar as we understand it) in apt moral coloration. There is nothing problematic about our need to find out details, either in order to understand the situation, or to know how best to implement our desired response. As Ivanhoe notes, Wang actually recognizes the need to “investigate many actual details” quite explicitly, even while emphasizing that the basis of one’s moral response lies not in the details

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281.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 283.

but in removing selfness and preserving Universal Coherence.<sup>51</sup> Concerning Ivanhoe's suggestion that moral development is more like the gradual cultivation of taste, I reply (on Wang's behalf) that moral responsiveness is a many-times-a-day affair that we all engage in, mostly rather well. When we go wrong, it's typically the case that we can readily come to see what the better response would have been, when it is explained to us. Moral responsiveness is not, typically, a deeply subtle matter such that only those with much training can see it. It is not like tasting the hint of cloves in bottle of fine wine—the "hint" that is so subtle that even when an enthusiastic but under-educated wine drinker like myself is told of it, I still cannot perceive it. While more could surely be said on the subject (including further exploration of relevant psychological literature), I do not find it obvious that a connoisseur's taste is the right way to understand a moral exemplar. When we go wrong, it's typically the case that we can readily come to see what the better response would have been, when it is explained to us. Moral responsiveness is not, typically, a deeply subtle matter such that only those with much training can see it. It is not like tasting the hint of cloves in a bottle of fine wine—the 'hint' that is so subtle that even when an enthusiastic but under-educated wine drinker like myself is told of it, I still cannot perceive it. While more could surely be said on the subject (including further exploration of relevant psychological literature), I do not find it obvious that a connoisseur's taste is the right way to understand a moral exemplar.

Even if we do not follow Ivanhoe in adopting the model of the connoisseur, we still might be tempted by the idea that the notion of skill must play a role in explaining moral development. Psychologists have engaged in extensive studies of expert or skilled behavior and

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<sup>51</sup> Wang, *Record for Practice with Detailed Annotations*, 30; Wang, *Record for Practice*, 8 (§3).

of the acquisition of expertise, and are beginning to apply these frameworks to moral development.<sup>52</sup> Philosopher Daniel Jacobson has argued that McDowell's model of moral perception cannot be combined with a skill model of virtue, since the development of skills requires feedback based on concerns that we already have, whereas McDowell's understanding of virtuous perception ties it to a distinct "space of reasons" that simply "silences" our pre-existing emotional reactions.<sup>53</sup> If this is correct, then is Wang Yangming equally vulnerable? Perhaps not, since Wang makes clear that we all already care about the deliverances of *liangzhi*, even though we do not always feel them as strongly and clearly as we should. Still, what would growing skill be about, on Wang's model, if not the growing expertise of our *liangzhi* itself? The obvious answer for us to try out is: the skill of being more maturely committed to the Way and (consequently) less selfish. Perhaps the skill model can help us understand the gradual development of a non-selfish perspective on the world, and the increasing force with which we experience the felt goodness of *liangzhi* can provide the needed feedback to make skilled improvement possible.

Much of what I said above about connoisseurs applies to experts as well: I think we have reason to resist a too-simple conflation of moral exemplar and moral expert. One advantage of an engagement with Wang Yangming is that he pushes us to think about the assumptions underlying psychologists' explanations of moral functioning. At the same time, several challenges remain for Wang and for contemporary Confucians. Wang's talk of a unitary "good knowing" may need to be re-thought as a kind of idealization: a way of referring to a perceptual capacity that we have

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<sup>52</sup> Narvaez and Lapsley, "The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise," 150–160.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Jacobson, "Seeing by Feeling: Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception," *Ethic Theory Moral Practice* 8, no. 4 (2005): 400.

without needing to learn it, but which rests on various other functions that can be separately analyzed. For that matter, even if I have found Wang's way of talking about active moral perception to be extremely insightful, we should remember that other Neo-Confucians disagreed with him on key matters of analysis and pedagogy, and perhaps they were closer to the truth than he. There are many directions in which future research based on the ideas canvassed in this paper might go.

## V. Conclusion

In two ways the approach of this paper can be seen as friendly to some degree of relativism or pluralism. First, rather than making a putatively universal notion like reciprocity central to my account, I have focused on moral perception. As I noted earlier, insofar as moral perception involves categories that are articulated via language and culture, it seems hard to deny that a plurality of schemas will result. Second, I have explicitly invoked the theorizing and categories of a non-Western tradition. Notwithstanding the important similarities between Neo-Confucian and contemporary psychological theories, there can be no doubt that significant differences are also present. Consider, for example, the role of Universal Coherence in Wang Yangming's framework. I also mentioned above the explicit place in McAdam's "New Big Five" theory for culturally distinctive narratives. At the same time, however, we should not downplay the ways in which objectivity enters into the accounts of many of my sources. Even though Neo-Confucians emphasize particularity and the constitutive role of one's own reactions in determining Coherence, they are still committed to the objectivity of Coherence: one can be wrong about it, and can be brought to see this.<sup>54</sup> Wang Yangming would also criticize any theory not built

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<sup>54</sup> Angle, *Sagehood*, chap. 2.

around Coherence and *liangzhi* (good knowing) as failing to grasp the way the universe is. The psychologists tend to be less interested in the construction of specific normative theories, but even though the researchers on whom I have drawn reject Kohlberg's Kantianism, they still offer us at least two sources of objectivity. First, their work on the empirical basis of moral functioning offers various potential constraints on normative theories. For example, if a goal of one's normative theory is to better-cultivate high moral functioning on the model of actual exemplars, then understanding how and why exemplars do what they do should be critical. Second, built-in to many of the psychological theories I have examined are explanations of how one can go wrong, for instance as discussed in the section above on "shallow knowledge." In short, the framework for understanding morality that is implicit in this essay certainly allows for a plurality of moral perspectives, but it also points toward various ways in which these perspectives will share commonalities and perhaps—especially if we allow that our theorists are fallible people who may be wrong about some aspects of their subject—engage in legitimate mutual influence and cross-perspective learning.

I mentioned near the beginning that some contemporary psychologists, disturbed by the degree to which their sub-discipline had been held hostage by the framework of a single philosophical tradition (namely, Kantian morality), advocate 'psychologized morality' rather than 'moralized psychology.' I certainly agree that we need to be very cautious about allowing a particular philosophical tradition to artificially narrow the kinds of empirical questions that researchers pursue. Nonetheless, we also want to avoid the opposite problem, namely allowing the empirical research—which will always be constrained by which types of experiments are practicable, fundable, interesting to leading researchers, and so on—to dictate the confines of morality. Superior to either extreme would be an open and on-going dialogue among



philosophical and psychological approaches, each looking to the others for inspiration, support, and challenges. Following in the footsteps of scholars like Joel Kupperman and Owen Flangan, I want to further suggest that bringing non-Western philosophical voices into these cross-disciplinary conversations can have extremely salutary effects.

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