

## **Commentary on Rong-Lin Wang’s “Moral Sensitivity, Emotion-Based Theory of Ethics, and Confucian Moral Psychology”**

Ann A. Pang-White\*

I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Rong-Lin Wang’s paper and have learned a great deal from his thoughtful and meticulous analysis of David Wong’s (a well-known professor of philosophy at Duke University) interpretation of Mengzi’s Confucian ethics and moral psychology, and his own construction of an emotion-based Confucian virtue ethics.

In contrast with reason-based moral models, Professor Wang argues that from the perspective of Confucian ethics (in particular as expounded and articulated in the *Mengzi* 《孟子》 (the *Book of Mencius*) the extension of moral feeling or emotion is absolutely essential for the personal cultivation of virtue. Moreover, such an extension is foundational and fundamental to what counts as “acting morally” in Confucian morality. Based on this reading of Confucian ethics, he further argues that while David Wong’s rejection of dichotomized interpretations of “moral extension”—either the “purely logical

---

\* Professor, Department of Philosophy, The University of Scranton

extension” (favoring reason, in alliance with Kant) or the “purely emotive extension” (favoring emotion, in alliance with Hume)—to be one-sided and foreign to Confucian ethics is correct, Wong missed the mark when he advances the following two claims. (a) In Confucian ethics, reasoning is a necessary pre-condition for the full development of one’s moral feeling. Without “reason,” Confucian moral feeling would become unintelligent or at least would fall short of being capable of functioning as a guide for moral life. And, (b) Confucian ethics endorses a non-dichotomized interpretation of the mutual complementarity of reason and emotion without giving priority to either reason or emotion.

In Dr. Wang’s view, based on textual evidence from both the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius*, moral emotion/feeling plays an unsurpassed role in Confucian ethics. Moral feeling, therefore, has both a temporal priority and a normative priority to moral reasoning. In other words, moral feeling and moral sensitivity must take place first and are the measurement of moral reasonableness rather than the reverse. Thus, Confucian ethics is best classified as an emotively-based virtue ethics—not that it devalues reason, but in the sense that moral sensitivity is both the very basis and the added luster of moral reasonableness. Dr. Wang has made convincing arguments in his paper and I agree with his analysis on many fronts. Furthermore, based on the non-dualistic approach to moral feeling and reasoning in Chinese thought, I would also suggest that the Chinese character *xin* (心) is best translated as “heart-mind” or “to feel-think at the same time” rather than simply as “mind” as it has appeared a few times in the paper.

My following questions deal more with my desire to learn more about some of the fine points that Dr. Wang is making and suggesting further refinement of some parts of the paper rather than raising any serious objections to his thesis.

1. In the beginning of the paper, Dr. Wang quoted a text from *Mengzi* 1A:7, which reported that King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 replaced a sacrificial ox with a lamb, due to his compassion that he cannot bear to see a ritual ox shivering with fear on its way to be slaughtered. But what is the difference between using an ox versus using a lamb in the moral cultivation of expanding one's moral feeling? Both ox and lamb are comparable in their physical size and are animals capable of suffering. Similarly, what is the difference between sparing one human life by taking another's in cultivating moral sensitivity? Are there texts in the *Mengzi* or in the classic commentarial tradition that address this?

2. In the article, Dr. Wang has suggested two Confucian methods that can help remove obstacles that would otherwise block the natural development of innate rudimentary moral feelings/sprouts. The first method is to remove misleading doctrines, and the second method is to prevent deprivation of the material well-being necessary for a secure livelihood because people would not have a secure mind without a secure livelihood, and to ask people who suffer from extreme poverty and displacement to act morally is inhumane (*Mengzi* 3A:3). On this account, my two follow-up questions are as follows:

(2.1) Regarding the first method of removing misleading doctrines, Dr. Wang enumerated the Yangzhu School 楊朱學派 (what may be called the Egoism School) and the Mohist School 墨家 (what is called the School of

Universal Love without distinction—it shares some similar traits with Utilitarianism in the Western traditions). It's easy to understand that an egoistic philosophy is rejected because it abandons and suffocates innate moral sprouts that humans are born with, and consequently the potential for the development of essential Confucian virtues such as humaneness (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智) in favor of one's own egoistic desires and benefits. It is unclear, however, how the Mohist idea of universal love and altruism (perhaps to an extreme) commits the same fault of suffocating these moral sprouts. It seems to me that the Mohist School's fault is of a different kind. That is, it is its extreme altruism, which *overly* extends one's innate moral feelings, that is inhumane. Thus, the critique of these two schools should be separate. I wonder how Dr. Wang thinks about this.

(2.2) I also wonder whether there is a third factor that impedes the natural development of moral feelings in a person other than the aforementioned two factors. Namely, the influence of the social environment, conventions, and habits. Consider, for example, 6A:8 in the *Mengzi*, the metaphor of Niu Mountain 牛山:

Mencius said, “The trees of Niu Mountain were once beautiful. But can the mountain be regarded any longer as beautiful since, being in the borders of a big state, the trees have been hewed down with axes and hatches? Still with the rest given them by the days and nights and the nourishment provided them by the rains and the dew, they were not without buds and sprouts springing forth. But then the cattle and

the sheep pastured upon them once and again. That is why the mountain looks so bald. When people see that it is so bald, they think that there was never any timber on the mountain. Is this the true nature of the mountain? Is there not [also] a heart of humanity and righteousness originally existing in [human beings]? The way in which [they] lose [their] originally good mind is like the way in which the trees are hewed down with axes and hatchets. As trees are cut down day after day, can a mountain retain its beauty? To be sure, the days and nights do the healing, and there is the nourishing air of the calm morning which keeps [them] normal in [their] likes and dislikes. But the effect is slight, and is disturbed and destroyed by what [they do] during the day. When there is repeated disturbance, the restorative influence of the night will not be sufficient to preserve (the proper goodness of the mind). (Chan, 1973: 56)

This passage may also shed further light on the connection between *zhi* 志 (volition, will) and *qi* 氣 (psycho-physical energy in a person), and the problem of moral weakness/habit that is socially induced. In such cases, social habits/conventions become inculcated as personal habits. For example, in a society that is habitually discriminatory against the poor, a particular social class, or a certain ethnic group, and so on, it will be difficult for an individual to break out that cultural ethos and to develop their moral sensitivity fully so as to extend it to all without prejudice.

## References

- Chan, Wing-Tsit (1973, trans. and ed.). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.  
[Reprint of 1963 edition.] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.