

## The Ultimate Moral Arbiter, Received Tradition or Autonomous Reason? Some Questions Concerning Morality and Development in Confucian Ethics

Richard A. Shweder<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 10 April 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

David Wong's essay is not only eye-opening, but (at least for me) contains an element of surprise. His topic is ancient Chinese ideas on how to promote moral development. His explicit aim is to describe and interpret various pictures in Confucian thought of "how the given and unlearned interacts with learning in moral cultivation." Consequently, special attention was given to classical Chinese models, metaphors, and didactic recommendations for promoting growth (craft production, sprout nourishment, adornment). An added bonus of the essay was the invitation to recognize and acknowledge some of the affinities between theories of growth and development in contemporary moral psychology and those much older Confucian reflections, including the common concern then and now with the role of emotions (or "moral sentiments") in ethics and the distinction between fast, unconscious, automatic, habitual mental processes and slow, self-conscious, reflective, or deliberative processes.

I will briefly comment on those topics in a moment. Certain claims do seem to be essentially debatable regardless of century and civilization. David Wong's exegesis of the variety of ideas in ancient Chinese thought about what is given and what is learned will surely seem familiar to contemporary students of socialization processes, where debates about the relevance of the following five hypothetical processes can always be found somewhere or other in the literature: (1) maturation (practice makes no difference; the competence or skill would have developed without it); (2) facilitation (because of practice, a competence or skill is attained more quickly than otherwise would have been the case); (3) induction (without practice there would have been no competence or skill at all in this domain); (4) attunement (because of practice, a higher

---

✉ Richard A. Shweder  
rshd@uchicago.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637, USA

level of competence or skill is attained than otherwise would have been the case); (5) maintenance/loss (the competence or skill was pre-existing or given but would have been lost or deactivated if it had not been kept active through practice) (see Werker 1989).

But first I want to mention the surprise, which was mainly about what was left unsaid in this essay rather than what was so brilliantly said. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, and I will say why later. But I was. So I will try to make sense of what (for me) was a striking and unanticipated absent feature in David Wong's depictions, namely, the apparent absence in ancient Chinese ethical thought of a formal definition of the moral domain per se (as distinct, for example, from scripts for ritual observance, rules concerning manners and etiquette, and social norms and customs in general); and also the apparent absence in these texts of any direct consideration of the role of autonomous moral reasoning (whether intuitive or deliberative, whether fast or slow) as a moral arbiter either in the original formation and embrace of moral attitudes or as a philosophical foundation for justifying or making critical judgments about the status of particular social customs (answering the question, what makes this or that social custom morally right or morally wrong?).

At times in Wong's essay I found myself thinking that the Socratic traditions and the Confucian traditions in moral philosophy have diverged in some pretty fascinating ways. Indeed, I wondered whether the Chinese ancients might have had considerable sympathy for the elders of Athens in their dispute with Socrates, arguing that mastering and having respect for the thick particularities of any cultural tradition is a better way to develop one's capacity for genuine moral judgment than relying exclusively on autonomous reason.

I realize it is hazardous to focus on what is unsaid. It is quite possible that other Confucian texts on moral development do engage in a conceptual analysis of the meaning of "morality" and of the role of autonomous reason in forming and promoting mature ethical judgments. I suppose it is even imaginable that those topics might have been a focus of attention in an additional David Wong essay on these particular texts. Perhaps (given Professor Wong's deep knowledge of ancient Chinese thought) my observation will be judged to be overstated or readily dismissed as inaccurate. If so, that is a verdict I am happy to accept.

There is, however, another hazard that concerns me. If there is some truth to the observation that ancient Chinese ethical thought (when compared to more contemporary European and American ethical thought in the Socratic tradition) tends to avoid a formal definition of morality and underplays the role of autonomous reason as an agent of growth and arbitration in moral development, my expression of surprise might be misconstrued as an invidious East versus West comparison of the "see what we've got that they don't have" variety, which is precisely the opposite of my intention in reporting my surprise. Indeed one of the aims of my commentary is to interpret the absence in a positive light—namely, I would like to give some credence to the didactic principle that ethical growth is most effectively promoted through increasingly skillful participation in the behavioral demands and requirements of a thick tradition or what some anthropologists have called a "custom complex." I will have more to say about the custom complex later.

There is of course a parochial aspect to my surprise, for it arises out of my own habitual familiarity with Socratic moral philosophies in the “West.” There the conversation often begins with a consideration of the meaning and ontological status of concepts such as “ought” and “ought not” or “right” and “wrong,” or good and bad. A basic assumption is that if there is an objective moral charter defining what is good then moral behavior is right because it is in the service of some objective good. Those ends in life that are genuine moral ends are those which “ought” to be universally binding or required of all similarly situated persons.

Having conceptualized the existence of an objective moral charter, the “Western” conversation then quickly moves to epistemological issues. There one finds a rich and ongoing debate about the role and limits of various forms of autonomous reason (direct rational intuitions of self-evident moral truths, hypothetical imperatives and means-ends calculations, categorical imperatives and deductive logical conclusions) viewed as the means by which individuals acquire knowledge about the morally right thing to do.

Consider, for example, Henry Sidgwick’s classic text *The Methods of Ethics* (1884). It begins with an analysis of a key moral concept expressed in the English language as “ought.” Sidgwick argues that any expression of an attitude of approval of an action that deserves to be called moral approval (in contrast, for example, to an expression of approval based on personal liking or a conditioned familiarity or a feeling of pleasure) is “inseparably bound up with the conviction, implicit or explicit, that the conduct approved is ‘objectively’ right—i.e., that it cannot, without error, be disapproved by any other mind” (Sidgwick 1884: 28). Speaking here as an anthropologist who does research in comparative ethics, it seems to me that moral sense of “oughtness” explicated by Sidgwick is not peculiar to the “West.” The anthropologist Raymond Firth, who conducted well-known field research on the Island of Tikopia in the Southwestern Pacific Ocean, wrote of the beliefs of the Tikopia people: “The spirits, just as men, respond to a norm of conduct of an external character. The moral law exists in the absolute, independent of the Gods” (Shweder 2012: 89). The moral sense of the idea of “oughtness” is so widely distributed among the cultures of the world that I am hesitant to conclude the notion of absolute moral law transcending all secular authority was entirely absent from the moral psychology of the Chinese people in ancient times. One wonders if the moral meaning of “oughtness” was just under-theorized by ancient Chinese moral philosophers, or perhaps presupposed or taken for granted.

In any case, within the Socratic tradition moral cultivation amounts to the preparation of an individual human mind to be highly attuned and receptive to those universally binding objective moral truths that are part of the natural order of things. Accordingly, to grow and become more sophisticated in one’s moral attitudes is to increasingly think for oneself, at least to such a degree that one can distinguish objective moral knowledge from attitudes that have their source in personal desire or the received opinions and routine acceptances of one’s local group. Sidgwick gives voice to that conception of genuine moral development: “...most persons are liable to confound intuitions, on the one hand with mere impressions and impulses, which to careful observation do not present themselves as claiming objective validity; and on the other hand, with mere opinions, to which the familiarity that comes from frequent hearing and repetition often gives an illusory air of self-evidence which attentive reflection disperses” (Sidgwick 1884: 340).

Here, for the sake of clarification, it is essential to note that for Sidgwick and other British moralists an “intuition” in the moral domain was included within the domain of human reason and was definitely not equated with feeling, affect, impulse, emotion, or desire. Intuition referred to the direct, effortless, spontaneous human grasp of self-evident objective truths—undeniably true propositions about the world that required no further justification or deliberation—and those rational “intuitions” were contrasted with learned habits, popular acceptances, and impulsive or affect-laden snap judgments that possessed an “illusory air of self-evidence.” Indeed, moral intuitions were often likened by British moral philosophers to rapidly grasped intuitions of a mathematical sort (for example, that two parallel lines cannot enclose any space or that a whole is greater than its parts). Human reason and rationality were not equated with slow and self-conscious mental processing and fast processing was not equated with affect-laden or impulsive thinking. Unfortunately those are the misleading equations that have become increasingly popular in some areas of contemporary moral psychology.

Nevertheless that said, it is in the nature of this type of conception of the moral domain that genuine ethical cultivation is not possible without a certain amount of attentive self-reflection as to the source of, and authority behind, one’s fast, spontaneous, and often affect-laden attitudes of approval and disapproval. The judgment made that something is of value, good or bad, right or wrong, ought to be done or ought not to be done, is more than just a fact of expressive consciousness. The expressed attitude of approval (or disapproval) also implies knowledge of something and thus invites interrogation about the substance and validity of that knowledge. Precisely because it expresses an attitude of approval (even if the attitude is rapidly or spontaneously produced and affect-laden) it is inherently normative in character and hence subject to scrutiny and potential criticism. The Socratic tradition in moral philosophy wants to know whether the expression of approval is moral approval and whether it is justified or not.

Sidgwick gives us a roadmap for thinking about moral development as a process of self-reflection wherein our attitudes of approval (or disapproval) are scrutinized. Ethical growth occurs as some fundamental distinctions get drawn, for example, between those of one’s own attitudes of approval that are grounded by means of the autonomy of reason in the objective moral charter versus those of one’s attitudes of approval that merely possess the semblance of a rational moral intuition but are really grounded in external authority, or have no authority at all. He begins the road trip drawing our attention to attitudes of approval based on nothing other than personal passions and affections: “For, on the one hand, it cannot be denied that any strong sentiment, however purely subjective, is apt to transform itself into the semblance of an intuition; and it requires careful contemplation to detect the illusion. Whatever we desire we are apt to pronounce desirable; and we are strongly tempted to approve of whatever conduct gives us keen pleasure.” He then directs our attention to attitudes of approval based in external authority such as positive law or the legal code of a society: “And on the other hand, among the rules of conduct to which we customarily conform, there are many which reflection shows to be really derived from some external authority: so that even if their obligation be unquestionable, it cannot be intuitively ascertained. This is of course the case with the Positive Law of the community to which we belong. There is no doubt that we ought,—at least generally speaking,—to obey this: but what it is we cannot of course ascertain by any process of abstract reflection, but only by consulting

Reports and Statutes. Here, however, the sources of knowledge are so definite and conspicuous, that we are in no danger of confounding the knowledge gained from studying them with the results of abstract contemplation.” Finally he has the following to say about attitudes of approval grounded in customary and traditional codes for behavior: “The case is somewhat different with the traditional and customary rules of behavior which exist in every society, supplementing the regular operation of Law proper: here it is much more difficult to distinguish the rules which a moral man is called upon to define for himself, by the application of intuitively known principles, from those as to which some authority external to the individual is recognized as the final arbiter” (Sidgwick 1884: 340–341).

It is very tempting in the light of Sidgwick’s distinctions to view ancient Chinese moral philosophies as a wholesale rejection of the Socratic idea that human minds have the capacity to develop to the point where, free of external authority, they are able to immediately grasp and feel bound by the objective self-evident truths of the natural moral order—the basic self-evident truths of justice, for example, such as treat like cases alike and different cases differently. It is very tempting as well to view Confucian thought as social and political philosophy rather than as a philosophy of morality per se. Sidgwick acknowledges that social life consists of obligations of many sorts, of things one “ought to do” because they have been legally enacted, or because they are customary social norms, rules of propriety or obligations of station associated with external authorities (including respected ancestors) whose instructions about how to live one’s life as a member of this community one is prepared to accept.

For the moment at least I myself would like to resist both those temptations. Or at least I would like to try to imagine that the Socratic and Confucian philosophers need each other. Or at least we need them both if we are ever to make sense of the social order as a moral order and to fully understand why most people feel at home in and affirmed by a particular way of life. What seems under-theorized in these ancient Chinese ethical texts—the absence I noticed—is a specification of precisely how the received rules of propriety, ritual procedures, and social duties of one’s tradition are in the service of some conception of natural moral law rather than acts of conformity motivated by fear or reward. What seems under-theorized in the Socratic tradition is the role of participation in a thick cultural tradition as a necessary condition for recognizing the self-evident moral truths that must be made manifest in any way of life with respect for which some group of human beings can feel at home.

No doubt the relationship between doctrine and custom, theory and practice, knowledge and habit is a complex one. However, it seems safe to say that no human beings live a fully examined life in which, on the basis of pure reason and direct experience, and free of all external authority, they have become fully autonomous arbiters of what is true, good, and beautiful. It also seems safe to say that no human beings live a fully unexamined mindless life either in which their attitudes of approval (and disapproval) are never objects of self-conscious reflection. David Wong’s exegesis of these ancient Chinese moral development texts highlights the developmental process of becoming fluent in and habitually respectful of a customary tradition, whereas most moral developmental theorists in the Socratic tradition privilege the developmental process of self-consciously liberating oneself of external authority and relying on the dictates of universal reason to evaluate the moral claims of each and every tradition.

There is much that is congenial in his exegesis to a psychological anthropologist and cultural psychologist such as me. It brings to mind the concept of the “custom complex” discussed by my anthropological mentor John Whiting and his co-author Irving Child in 1953 during an era when the concept of “habit” was still popular in the social sciences (Whiting and Child 1953). With respect to understanding the beliefs of members of a society who participate in a particular cultural practice (consider, for example, the routine practice of who sleeps by whom at night in a family compound) they remarked,

The performer of a practice does not necessarily consciously rehearse the belief to himself at each performance. [For example, a typical middle-class European American does not necessarily consciously think to himself or herself “I know that I can promote autonomy and independence in infants and young children by having them sleep alone” every time they go to bed at night.] If asked, however, he will generally be able to report immediately at least some of the associated beliefs; in this case one may surmise that rehearsal of the belief was not part of the stimulus pattern for the present performance of the custom but rather a significant part of the stimulus pattern earlier in the development of the custom. (Whiting and Child 1953: 28)

Whiting and Child imply that much of social behavior is habitual and automatic and that social life would not be possible if this were not so, but when it comes to understanding automatic or fluent responding there is also a story laden with moral values and reasons to be told about the acquisition of, and justification for, the behavior. I think the concept of the custom complex as a unit of analysis in developmental studies accords with David Wong’s views and with the views of others who are concerned with the connections between participating in the world and deliberating about it.

Whiting and Child’s comment also gets us to ask the following question. When it comes to participation in the way of life of one’s own cultural community, to what extent is the course of development from the deliberate to the automatic, or from the self-conscious to the fluent, or from the explicated to the tacitly understood? The story of the progressive shift from deliberation and self-consciousness to non-deliberative yet appropriate fluency is a developmental story that has not been acknowledged in child development studies, except perhaps by those interested in the acquisition of such physical skills as typing a letter, or hitting a golf ball; or perhaps learning to be a mannerly and dutiful son in ancient Chinese society.

## References

- Shweder, Richard A. 2012. “Relativism and Universalism.” In *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sidgwick, Henry. 1884. *The Methods of Ethics*. London: MacMillan and Company.
- Werker, Janet F. 1989. “Becoming a Native Listener.” *American Scientist* 77: 54–59.
- Whiting, John W. M., and Irving Child. 1953. *Child Training and Personality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.