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1
ETHICAL THOUGHT IN CHINA

Yang Xiao

Chinese ethical thought has a long history; it goes back to the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE), which was around the time of Socrates (469–399 BCE). In a brief chapter like this, it is obviously impossible to do justice to the richness, complexity, and heterogeneity of such a long tradition. Instead of trying to cover all the aspects of it, I focus on the early period (551–221 BCE), which is the founding era of Chinese philosophy. More specifically, I focus on the four main schools of thought and their founding texts: Confucianism (the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*), Mohism (the *Mozi*), Daoism (the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*), and Legalism (the *Book of Lord Shang*). There are two reasons for this choice. First, Chinese philosophers from later periods often had to present their own thoughts in the guise of commentaries on these founding texts; they spoke about them as well as through them. Second, this choice reflects the fact that early China is still the most scrutinized period of the history of Chinese philosophy by scholars in the English-speaking world, and that most of the important texts from this period have been translated into English.

It must be borne in mind that the early period lasted for about 300 years, which may still be too long for such a brief chapter to cover. My goal is not to provide an encyclopedic coverage or standard chronological account of ethical thought in early China. Rather, I want to identify important and revealing common features and themes of the content, style, and structure of ethical thought in this period that have reverberated throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, and have uniquely defined and characterized the tradition as a whole. In other words, this will not be a historian's, but rather a philosopher's, take on the history of Chinese ethical thought.

In this chapter I use terms such as "Chinese philosophy," "Chinese philosophers," and "Chinese ethics," which some scholars may find problematic. There has been an ongoing debate about whether there is "Chinese philosophy" (Defoort 2001 and 2006). Some scholars have argued that Confucianism is not a "philosophy" (Eno 1990), that there is no such thing as "Chinese ethics" (Mollgaard 2005), and that

Confucius is not a "philosopher of ethics" and has no "normative ethical theory" (Hansen 1992). This is obviously a complicated issue. The reality is that in China we can find both normative ethical *theory* and ethical *practices* such as self-cultivation through spiritual exercise. In what follows, I first address the unique problem of style in Chinese ethics; I then discuss the structure of the normative ethical theories of the four main schools of thought. I end with a discussion of the idea of philosophy as spiritual exercise, as well as a brief conclusion.

The problem of style in Chinese ethical thought

One main reason that Chinese philosophical texts are difficult to understand is our unfamiliarity with their styles. For example, when a contemporary reader picks up a copy of the *Analects*, she might find it very easy to understand the literal meaning of Confucius' short, aphorism-like utterances; however, she might still be baffled because she does not know what Confucius is doing with his utterances.

In his theory of interpretation, Davidson argues that an utterance always has at least three dimensions. Besides its "literal meaning," which is given by a truth-conditional semantics, it also has its "force" (what the speaker is doing with it, whether the speaker intends it to be an assertion, a joke, a warning, an instruction, and so on), as well as its "ulterior non-linguistic purpose" (why the speaker is saying what he says, what effects the speaker wants to have on what audience, and so on) (Davidson 1984a, b, 1993). We may say that the literal meaning is the "content" of an utterance, and the force and purpose are the "style" of the utterance. This theory might help us understand that whenever we do not understand an early Chinese text it is often not because the author is an "oriental mystic," but rather because we do not know enough about the historical background to understand what the author is trying to do. We as scholars often misunderstand Chinese philosophers because of our projected expectations about what they must have been trying to accomplish; as Bernard Williams puts it, "a stylistic problem in the deepest sense of 'style' ... is to discover what you are really trying to do" (Williams 1993: xviii–xix).

We now know a great deal about the historical background of early Chinese philosophy (Hsu 1965; Lewis 1990; Pines 2002; Lloyd and Sivin 2002; von Falkenhausen 2006); the most important aspect might be that the early philosophers were primarily trying to solve practical problems in the real world that seemed to be governed only by force and violence. To get a concrete sense of how extremely violent their time was, here are some revealing statistics. Confucius, the most important Confucian philosopher, lived around the end of the Spring and Autumn period (722–464 BCE); during the 258 years of the period, there were 1,219 wars, with only 38 peaceful years in between (Hsu 1965: 66). All of the other philosophers discussed in this chapter lived during the Warring

States period that lasted for 242 years (463–221 BCE), during which there had been 474 wars, and only 89 peaceful years (Hsu 1965: 64; also see Lewis 1990). Although there were fewer wars during the Warring States period, they were much longer and intense, and with much higher casualties. As we shall see, this fact has an important impact on how the early Chinese philosophers construct their ethical theories.

However, this turbulent time was also the golden years of early Chinese philosophy. Confucian philosophers such as Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi, the philosopher Mozi (the founder of Mohism), Daoist philosophers such as Laozi and Zhuangzi, and Legalist philosophers such as Shen Buhai, Shang Yang, Shen Dao, and Hanfeizi all lived through great political uncertainties and the brutalities of warfare, and their philosophies, especially their ethics, were profoundly shaped by this shared experience. We can find passages in these thinkers' work that show how they were traumatized by the wars and the sufferings of the people, and it should not come as a surprise that almost all of them saw themselves as "political agents and social reformers" (von Falkenhausen 2006: 11). They traveled from state to state, seeking positions with rulers, such as political advisers, strategists, and, ideally, high-ranking officials. One of the central problems they were obsessed with was the following: What must be done in order to bring peace, order, stability, and unity to the chaotic and violent world? Their solution to the practical problems of their time is a whole package, in which individual, familial, social, economic, political, legal, and moral factors were seamlessly interwoven. In fact, they did not have a distinction between ethics and politics, as we do today. They seemed to take for granted that questions about how one ought to act, feel, and live cannot be answered without addressing questions about what a good society ought to be like. This is why the terms "ethics" and "moral philosophy" should be understood in their broadest sense in this chapter, which includes "political philosophy" as well as "legal philosophy."

The structure of Chinese ethical theories

There are various ways to characterize the structure of an ethical theory. It seems that one way to characterize Chinese ethical theories is to articulate at least three components:

(a) A part that deals with a theory of the good or teleology which indicates what goals or ends one ought to pursue, as well as ideals one ought to imitate or actualize (Skorupski 1999).
(b) A part that provides an account of the factors that determine the moral status of an action (or a policy, an institution, a practice, etc.). They are roughly what Shelly Kagan calls "evaluational factors" or "normative factors" (Kagan 1998). For instance, if one takes the consequences of an action

as the only normative factor to determine its moral status, one would be a "factoral consequentialist."

(c) A part that gives justifications for its normative claims. It often involves a theory of the good, a theory of agency and practical reasoning, or a theory of human nature. This part consists of the "foundation" of an ethical theory (Kagan 1998). It can be read as addressing what Christine Korsgaard calls the "normative question" (Korsgaard 1996). For instance, if one justifies a policy (an action, an institution) by arguing that it is the best or necessary means to the realization of an ideal society, one would be a "foundational consequentialist."

In the next four sections, I discuss the ethical theory of each of the four schools of thought according to the following sequence. First, I discuss (a) its theory of the good on the level of the state, as well as on the level of the individual. Second, I discuss (b) its account of normative factors. Third, I discuss (c) how it justifies its normative claims.

More specifically, when I discuss (b), I pay attention to two issues: First, how it defines virtuous actions, whether it is "evaluational internalist" or "evaluational externalist" (Driver 2001: 68) – that is, whether a virtuous action is defined in terms of factors internal to the agent, such as belief, intention, desire, emotion, and disposition (hence an internalist), or in terms of factors external to the agent, such as the consequence (hence an externalist). We shall use "internalism" as a shorthand for "evaluational internalism" in the rest of this chapter; one should not confuse it with a very different view also labeled "internalism," which can be found in the debate regarding whether reason for action must be internal or not. Second, I shall pay special attention to the issue of whether an ethical theory is "deontological" in the sense that it regards "constraints" (the moral barriers to the promotion of the good) as an evaluational factor (Kagan 1998).

Confucian ethical theory

Let us start with Confucianism (Schwartz 1985: 56–134, 255–320; Graham 1989: 9–33, 107–32, 235–67). The Confucians, most famously Confucius (551–479 BCE) (Van Norden 2002), Mencius (385–312 BCE) (Shun 1997; Liu and Ivanhoe 2002), and Xunzi (310–219 BCE) (Klein and Ivanhoe 2000), have a theory of the good on the level of the state, as well as the level of the individual. With regard to the state, they believe that it is important for a state to have external goods, such as being orderly, prosperous, having an extensive territory, and a vast population. However, the Confucians believe that an ideal state must have "moral character" in the sense that the state should have no other end than the perfection of human relationships and the cultivation of virtues of the individual, and that the morality of the state must be the same as the morality of the individual. This is

arguably the most important feature of Confucian ethics, which the Legalists such as Hanfei would eventually reject by arguing that private and public morality ought to be different, and that Confucian virtues could actually be public vices. The Confucian ideal society that everyone ought to pursue should have at least the following moral characteristics:

(1) Every one follows social rules and rituals (*li*) that govern every aspect of life in the ideal society (*Analects* 1.15, 6.27, 8.2, see Lau 1998; *Xunzi* 10.13, see Knoblock 1988).

(2) Everyone in the ideal society has social roles and practical identities that come with special obligations; for instance, a son must have filial piety (*xiao*) towards his father (*Analects* 1.2, 1.11, 2.5–8, 13.18, 17.21), an official must have loyalty (*zhong*) towards his or her ruler (3.19), and a ruler must have benevolence (*ren*) towards his or her people (*Mencius* 1A4, 1A7, 1B5, see Lau 2005; *Xunzi* 10.13). A *junzi* (virtuous person, or gentleman scholar-official) must have a comprehensive set of virtues, such as *ren* (humanity, benevolence, or empathy), *yi* (justice, righteousness), *li* (social rules and rituals internalized as deep dispositions), *zhi* (practical wisdom), *xin* (trust), *yong* (courage), and *shu* (reciprocity, or the golden rule internalized as a deep disposition).

(3) "Benevolent politics" (*ren-zheng*) is practiced when the state adopts just and benevolent policies regarding the distribution of external goods, as well as policies that may be characterized as "universal altruism" in the sense that a virtuous person cares about everyone in the world, including both those who are near and dear and those who are strangers, especially the weak and the poor (*Mencius* 1A4, 1A7, 1B5).

(4) "Virtue-based politics" is practiced when the ruler wins the allegiance and trust of the people not through laws or coercion, but through the transformative power of virtuous actions (*Analects* 2.1, 2.19, 2.20, 12.7, 12.17, 12.18, 12.19, 13.4, 13.6, 12.18, 14.41; *Mencius* 2A3, 3A2, 4A20, 7A12–14).

(5) The unification of the various states in China is not achieved through force and violence, but through the transformative power of virtue (*Mencius* 2A3; 4B16, 7B13, 7B32; *Xunzi* 9.9, 9.19a, 10.13, 18.2).

The central idea here is that it is not enough for a state to be strong and prosperous; it must have moral character, such as justice and benevolence – virtues intimately connected with politics. I shall use the term "virtue politics" (*de-zheng*) in a broad sense to refer to the Confucian ethical-political program as a whole.

On the level of the individual, the Confucians also have a theory of external goods. The external goods include wealth, power, fame, and worldly success. They claim that these external goods are not under one's control, but rather are allotted by fate or Heaven, and they have no intrinsic value, hence one should not be concerned with them (*Analects* 12.5, 14.35; *Mencius* 1B14, 5A6, 5A8, 6A16–17, 7A3, 7A42, 7B24). Furthermore, one's actions should not be motivated

by the desire to obtain these external goods (*Analects* 2.18, 15.32, 19.7, 15.32). In sharp contrast to external goods, "virtue," "will," and "true happiness" are not subject to luck, and are under the agent's control (*Analects* 7.30, 9.31, 9.26, 6.11). Virtuous persons take pleasure in doing virtuous actions, even when they live in poverty (*Analects* 6.11).

In general, the Confucians are "internalists" in the sense that they define virtuous actions in terms of factors internal to the agent, such as the agent's intentions, motives, emotions, or deep dispositions, rather than defining them in terms of factors external to the agent, such as external goods or consequences. Among all the Confucians, Mencius might be the most persistent advocate for an internalist definition of virtuous actions. For example, in Mencius, we find an "expressivist" definition of benevolent actions, which is that an action is benevolent if it is a natural and spontaneous expression of one's deep dispositions of compassion for the people (Xiao 2006b). The deep disposition of compassion is what Mencius calls the "heart that cannot bear to see the suffering of others" (2A6):

> The reason why I say that everyone has the heart that cannot bear to see the suffering of others is as follows. Suppose someone suddenly sees a child who is about to fall into a well. Everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of empathy, and it is not because one wants to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because one wants to gain fame among one's neighbors and friends, nor because one dislikes the sound of the child's cry.
> (*Mencius* 2A6; see Lau 2005; translation modified)

Mencius believes that this "heart" is innate and universal, and it is what distinguishes a human being from a non-human animal. One might argue that Mencius' account of the virtue of *benevolence* is similar to Michael Slote's account of virtue in his agent-based sentimentalist virtue ethics (Slote 1997, 2007). However, it is not clear whether Slote's theory as a whole applies to Mencius' accounts of other virtues, such as justice, ritual propriety, and wisdom. It might be possible that, in theory, Mencius could have given an account of these virtues in terms of benevolence and empathy, as Slote has done. However, such an account seems to be missing in the *Mencius*.

The Confucians are "deontologists" in the sense that they believe in the existence of constraints on the promotion of the good. Both Mencius and Xunzi use almost the same words to emphasize the existence of such moral barriers to the promotion of the good: "if one needs to undertake an unjust action, or to kill an innocent person, in order to gain the whole world, one should not do it" (*Mencius* 2A2; *Xunzi* 11.1a). Mencius claims that the rulers who send people to die in aggressive wars or take away people's livelihood through heavy taxation are no different from those who kill an innocent person with a knife (*Mencius* 1A3, 1A4, 3B8), and that scholar-officials should not help the rulers make the state prosperous by means other than the virtue politics of benevolence (*Mencius* 4A14, 7A33).

The Confucians have at least two types of justification for their normative claims about virtue and virtue politics: (a) arguments based on a theory of human nature, and (b) pattern-based, consequentialist arguments.

The first type can be found only in the *Mencius*. It relies on what we may call Mencius' perfectionist and expressivist theory of human nature, which consists of two main ideas: (1) everyone's "human nature" (*xing*) is rooted in his or her heart–mind, which is the innate dispositions of virtues such as benevolence, justice, ritual propriety, and wisdom, and this is what distinguishes humans from non-human beasts; (2) human nature is a powerful, active, and dynamic force; it necessarily expresses itself in the social-political world. In other words, the inner nature must manifest itself in the outer (the human body as well as the social world). This is why, for Mencius, virtue politics is not just a *normative* ideal; it is also *real*, and it necessarily becomes reality in human history.

Mencius sometimes uses "*xing*" as a verb, which means to "let *xing* be the source of one's action." He claims that the sages (virtuous persons) always let *xing* be the motivational source of their virtuous actions; their virtuous actions flow spontaneously from *xing*. In other words, when human nature expresses itself as human action, it would necessarily be virtuous action.

This reconstruction of Mencius' view as an argument based on an essentialist theory of human nature is certainly not the only way to interpret the *Mencius*. In fact, some scholars have argued that Mencius does not have an essentialist theory of human nature (Ames 1991). There has been a more general debate about whether the Confucians have rational arguments based on metaphysical theories of human nature, and the debate often takes place in the context of a comparative study of Confucian and Aristotelian ethics (MacIntyre 1991, 2004a, b; Sim 2007; Yu 2007; Van Norden 2007). There has also been a debate about how to understand the concept of human nature (*xing*) in Chinese philosophy, whether it should be translated as "human nature" at all, and whether it is an innate disposition or a cultural achievement (Graham 2002; Ames 1991; Bloom 1997, 2002; Shun 1991, 1997; Liu 1996; Ivanhoe 2000; Lewis 2003; Munro 2005; Van Norden 2007).

The second type of justification, namely the pattern-based, consequentialist mode of arguments, can be found in the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*. The most crucial premise of the argument is based on observations of patterns in social reality, from which the Confucians conclude that virtue politics is the best or necessary means to achieve the Confucian ideal society (*Analects* 2.1, 2.19, 2.20, 12.7, 12.17, 12.18, 12.19, 13.4, 13.6, 12.18, 14.41; *Mencius* 2A3, 3A2, 4A20, 7A12–14). From this premise, it follows that, if one wants to pursue the end of the Confucian ideal society, one ought to (i.e., it is instrumentally rational to) practice virtue politics. In other words, this consequentialist mode can also be labeled as an "instrumentalist" mode of argument. A good example of such a justification is the following passage from the *Mencius*: "If a ruler, equipped with a heart that cannot bear to see the suffering of others, practices a politics

of compassion and empathy, he will rule the world as easily as rolling it on his palm" (2A6).

It can be shown that the pattern-based, instrumentalist mode of justification is one of the most popular among all the Chinese philosophers, even though they do not use the technical terms we have been using here, such as "the good," "means," "end," and "instrumental rationality." However, the lack of the general term does not imply the lack of the concept. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi were the first in China to use various concrete paradigm cases of instrumental irrationality to talk about people who desire an end, yet refuse to adopt the correct means to the end (*Mencius* 1A7B, 2A4, 4A3, 4A7, 5B7; *Xunzi* 7.5, 16.4). For instance, since Confucius did not have a general term for "rational" or "irrational," when he spoke of a case in which someone desires an end and at the same time does not want to adopt the necessary means to that end, Confucius would say that this person is just like someone who "wants to leave a house without using the door" (*Analects* 6.17).

Mohist ethical theory

Let us now turn to Mohism (Schwartz 1985: 135–72; Graham 1989: 33–64; Van Norden 2007: 139–98). Mozi (480–390 BCE), the founder of Mohism, lived sometime after the death of Confucius and before the birth of Mencius. The founding text of Mohism, the *Mozi*, is a very complex text with many layers. It was certainly not written by a single author; there are at least three sets of ideas, representing the views of three subgroups of Mohists (Graham 1989). Mohism as a school of thought was once the only rival to Confucianism, before the rise of Daoism and Legalism. But Mohism disappeared around the early years of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to AD 220), until it was rediscovered by scholars in the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644–1911).

Like the Confucians, the Mohist notion of the ideal society is that it must have not only external goods – such as the state being orderly and prosperous (*Mozi* 126–8, see Yi-Pao Mei 1929) – but also moral character. However, their specifications of the moral character of their ideal society are not always the same. Both the Confucians and the Mohists believe in universal altruism, which is that the *scope* of a virtuous person's caring should be universal, which implies that he or she should care about not only those who are near and dear but also those who are strangers. However, they have different views about the *intensity* of the caring: for the Confucians, one should care about the near and the dear more than strangers, but the Mohists insist that one must care about everyone in the world equally and impartially. They are the first ones in China to have argued for the general obligations of "impartial caring" (*jian-ai*) (Wong 1989).

In terms of how to evaluate the moral status of actions and policies, some of the Mohists are factoral consequentialists. Unlike the internalist Confucians, who emphasize internal factors such as emotions and dispositions of the agent, some of the Mohists claim that a policy ought to be adopted if, judging from an impartial point of view, it promotes benefits for all people. Hence, unlike the Confucians, these Mohists are "externalists" in the sense that they define right actions in terms of consequences external to the agent.

Like the Confucians, some Mohists are "deontologists" in the sense that they believe in the existence of moral barriers to the promotion of the external goods. For instance, a ruler should not adopt "unjust" actions or policies such as taking the land that belongs to other states, or "cruel" actions or policies such as killing innocent people (*Mozi* 158). They claim that all aggressive wars are unjust, and that only self-defensive wars can be justified, and they believe it is their obligation to help small states to defend themselves against aggressors (*Mozi* 98–116, 128, and 257–9).

Some of the Mohists have a program for the realization of an ideal society, but their recommendation is not Confucian virtue politics. They do not consider virtue politics to be the best means to achieve their ideal society, and they are the first theorists in China to give a systematic account of how to design political institutions to guarantee peace and civil order. Unlike the Confucians, they do not believe that virtue has transformative power; instead they believe that institutions with a mechanism of reward and punishment need to be created to guarantee that there will be uniformity of opinions about justice and morality, that good deeds will be rewarded and bad ones punished, and that good and capable people will be promoted.

Some of the Mohists justify this program by appealing to their theory of human nature, which is radically different from the Mencian theory of the innate goodness of human nature. The Mohist theory is somewhat akin to a Hobbesian view, which is that human beings naturally seek rewards and avoid punishments. In their justification of the institutional solution to the practical problem of how to bring civil order to the world, the Mohists assume that people's strongest motives are their desire for reward and aversion of punishment, and they believe that people will behave rationally and morally when certain institutions with mechanisms of reward and punishment are in place.

Mohism and Confucianism are similar in terms of their belief in the existence of moral constraints, as well as their conviction that an ideal society must have moral character. As we shall see, both are in sharp disagreement with the Legalists, who deny the existence of any constraints.

Legalist ethical theory

Let us now turn to Legalism (Schwartz 1985: 321–49; Graham 1989: 267–92). Legalism as an ethical theory was not formulated and articulated systematically until Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE), Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE), Shen Dao (ca. 350–ca. 275 BCE), and Hanfeizi (d. 233 BCE). Here I focus primarily on Shang Yang's version of

Legalism. For twenty-one years (359–338 BCE), Shang Yang was the architect of what was later known as Shang Yang's reform in the state of Qin, abolishing Confucian virtue politics (*de-zheng*) and replacing it with Legalist "punishment-based politics" (*xing-zheng*). Shang Yang was mainly responsible for having made Qin into the most powerful state among the warring states; he laid down the foundation for its eventual unification of China in 221 BCE. Although Legalism was tremendously influential as a political practice, as a school of thought it was not as widespread as Confucianism and Daoism; very few philosophers labeled themselves Legalists.

The Legalists were often powerful officials or advisers to rulers, and their theory of the good is that a ruler ought to pursue only one end, namely the external goods of the state, such as order, prosperity, dominance, and strength (*Book of Lord Shang* 199, see Duyvendak 1963). By a state being orderly, they mean that crimes should be completely abolished (203), and they do not hesitate to punish light crimes with heavy punishments, especially the death penalty. To make their state dominant, they advocate aggressive warfare at the expense of the well-being of ordinary people. In achieving such ends, the Legalists do not care whether the state has moral character, such as whether it has a just legal system.

The Legalists are "factoral consequentialists" in the sense that they determine whether an action or policy ought to be adopted by looking at whether it promotes the external goods of the state. Since what determines the Legalists' evaluation of the moral status of actions is external to the agent, they are "externalists." They deny that there are constraints on a ruler's actions; the ruler can do anything necessary to promote their goals, including adopting policies that are unjust.

The Legalists rely on a theory of human nature to justify their punishment-based politics (*xing-zheng*). The basic idea is that human beings have only two basic desires or emotions: greed and fear, which is why they like rewards and dislike punishment (*Book of Lord Shang* 241). From this Shang Yang claims that the following pattern exists: if a ruler governs by punishment, people will be fearful, and will not commit crimes, out of fear (*Book of Lord Shang* 229–30). In other words, the best means to achieve the legalist ideal society is to rely on physical force, as well as the threat of physical force.

This is in stark contrast with the Confucian belief that the best means to achieve the Confucian ideal society is through virtue, not force. Shang Yang turns the Confucian idea upside down: "Punishment produces force; force produces strength; strength produces awe; awe produces virtue. [Therefore], virtue comes from punishment" (*Book of Lord Shang* 210). And he further concludes, "In general, a wise ruler relies on force, not virtue, in his governing" (243). In the Legalists' justification, they are making two bold assumptions about human nature: first, fear is the strongest moral emotion; second, people's actions can be completely controlled by inducing fear. The Legalists also reject the Mencian idea that human beings' innate dispositions are the only source for morality.

The debate between Confucian *de-zheng* (virtue politics) and Legalist *xing-zheng* (punishment-based politics) is one of the most important and long-standing debates in the history of China, which arguably still has great relevance to the ethical and political life in China today.

Daoist ethical theory

The two main founders of Daoism (Graham 1989: 170–235; Schwartz 1985: 186–254) are Laozi (Csikszentmih and Ivanhoe 1999) and Zhuangzi (Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996). Unlike in the case of the Confucians, the Mohists, and the Legalists, it is still disputed by scholars today whether Laozi is a real historical figure. However, it is commonly acknowledged that Zhuangzi might have been a real figure, although we are unsure of his dates (he might have lived before Xunzi). Despite the lack of knowledge of Laozi and Zhuangzi as historical figures, the two texts that are attributed to them, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, have been immensely influential throughout Chinese history. They are read not only by the Daoists but also by the Confucians, and when Indian Buddhism was introduced to China, many Buddhist concepts were first translated into Daoist terms. The later development of Chinese philosophy owes much to both Daoism and Buddhism, although Confucian ideas still remain the core of the philosophical canon.

The Daoists radically disagree with everybody else's notion of the ideal society. Laozi rejects the Legalist regime in which, as Laozi puts it, "the ruler is feared." However, Laozi claims that the Confucian regime, in which "the ruler is loved and praised," is only the second best, and the best is the Daoist state where the ruler is "a shadowy presence to his subjects" (*Daodejing* Ch. 17, see Lau 1964). In other words, like the Confucians, the Daoists are opposed to the Legalists' emphasis on punishment, but they are also opposed to the Confucians' emphasis on virtues and social rules, and they ridicule the Confucians' and Legalists' obsessive aspiration to unify China.

Laozi's justification for the Daoist ideal society and its political program is pattern-based. In fact, almost every chapter of the *Daodejing* contains pattern-statements. Laozi believes that patterns in nature are the best model for understanding patterns in human affairs. Based on his observations of patterns both in society and in nature, Laozi rejects the Confucian idea about the necessity of social rules and rituals; he thinks that the best way to bring about an ideal society is through the power of moral exemplars, or "teaching without words" (*Daodejing* Chs 2, 43, 56).

Laozi's argument against the Legalists' punishment-based politics is also pattern-based. He claims that the empirical patterns actually show that fear of death does not deter people from committing crimes, as the Legalist would have us believe: "When the people do not fear death, why frighten them with death?"

(*Daodejing* Ch. 74). Laozi further says that only Heaven, which he calls "the Master Carpenter," is in charge of matters of life and death, and the state should not kill on behalf of Heaven. And this is because of the following pattern: "In chopping wood on behalf of the Master Carpenter, one seldom escapes chopping off their own hands instead" (*Daodejing* Ch. 74).

Zhuangzi is much more radical than Laozi both in terms of the style and content of his thinking. In terms of style, it is difficult to find straightforward formulations of theory and argument in the *Zhuangzi*. What one finds instead are parables and seemingly strange stories: Zhuangzi himself as a character who dances and sings at the funeral of his wife; a large fish transformed into a bird with wings covering half of the sky; a legendary bandit making fun of Confucius; abstract conceptions such as "Knowledge" becoming human characters, meeting up with the impersonation of "Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing," and so on and so forth. And all of these are told in a distinctly Zhuangzian style that is indirect, ironic, and elusive; it is almost impossible to recover argument and theory from the text. Of course, this has not stopped scholars offering systematic exegesis that assimilates it to philosophical ideas. For example, it has been suggested that Zhuangzi offers an epistemological argument against the Confucian normative claims; his argument seems to be a "sceptical" one, which is that there simply exists no neutral or objective perspective from which one can know which normative claims are valid (Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996). It has also been suggested that Zhuangzi is a relativist (Hansen 1992). There are certainly passages that can be easily interpreted to support all of these readings.

It can be argued that Zhuangzi also offers an ontological argument against the Confucian expressivist theory of human nature. He denies that the Confucian virtues and social rules are the expressions of human nature or the essence of humanity. We may attribute to him an anti-expressivist theory of human nature, which is that human beings have no essence or nature, and the true self is empty and without any content, form, or structure, especially not the Confucian hierarchical structure with the heart–mind as the master organ. For Zhuangzi, this is why the Confucian rituals and virtues do not *express*, but rather *cover* and *distort*, humanity (*Zhuangzi* Ch. 2).

If one does not want to attribute any epistemological or ontological theories to Zhuangzi, one may make sense of Zhuangzi by saying that he is trying to articulate a new set of values, of which abstract freedom is the most important. Instead of saying that Zhuangzi holds an ontological view that humanity is empty and without content, we may say that Zhuangzi holds a value judgment, which is that anything concrete and substantive is a limitation on freedom. Zhuang seems to be the first to have discovered what might be called "negativity" or "abstract freedom," to put it in Hegelian terms. If the Confucians could be said to have discovered that one can only become truly human and free when one participates in a concrete and determinate ethical life that consists of social institutions such as family, community, and the state, Zhuangzi could be said to have

discovered abstract freedom, which is that one always has the capacity and freedom to renounce any activity, to give up any goal, or to withdraw completely from this world. Zhuangzi sees any perspective or position that has determinate contents as a restriction on one's freedom; similarly, he sees any particularization and objective determination of social life as a restriction or limitation on one's free and purposeless wandering. He instinctively wants to spread his wings and fly away from it.

It has become a cliché these days to say that Confucianism and Daoism complement each other (*ru dao hu bu*). But there is some truth to this popular saying, especially if we also add Buddhism to the mix. The essential tensions between Confucianism and Daoism, between Confucianism and Buddhism, have indeed been a major source of creativity in the history of Chinese philosophy.

Moral psychology and self-cultivation through spiritual exercise

The philosophical texts from early China can be divided into two groups: those that do, and those that do not, contain materials that deal with techniques concerning what to make of oneself, which may be called "self-cultivation," "self management," or "selfhood as creative transformation" (Nivison 1996, 1999; Ivanhoe 2000; Tu 1979, 1985). The Confucian and Daoist texts belong to the first group, and the Mohist and Legalist texts to the second. The reason why the Mohists do not emphasize self-cultivation might have something to do with the fact that they think one's belief can directly motivate actions (Nivison 1996), hence it is enough if one intellectually disapproves of bad desires. In the case of the Legalists, there is no space for self-cultivation in their thinking; they believe that the penal laws set up by the state are enough to produce the correct behaviors (Xiao 2006b).

The Confucian belief in virtue politics implies that it is crucial that one become virtuous through self-cultivation. The Confucians believe that the techniques of self-cultivation go beyond inner mental operation. They involve all aspects of a person's being: intellect, sensibility, imagination, will, as well as the body as a whole. It is in this sense that self-cultivation is not only "intellectual" exercise, but also "spiritual" or "material" exercise (Hadot 1995, 2002; Csikszentmih 2004; Xiao 2006a). For Confucius and Xunzi, it is through observing *li* (social rules and rituals) that one cultivates virtuous desires, and one must be guided by teachers and helped by virtuous friends along the way, hence the internalization and mastery of *li* is essentially a social process (Tu 1979, 1985; Eno 1990; Wong 2004). The goal is to internalize the social rules and rituals so that one naturally has virtuous desires. Confucius calls this process "restraining oneself with social rules and rituals" (*Analects* 6.27, 9.11), "establishing oneself through social rules and rituals" (*Analects* 8.8, 20.3), or self-discipline by submitting oneself to social rules and rituals (*keji fuli*) (*Analects* 12.1). When a student asks

about how to engage in *keji fuli*, Confucius replies, "Observe the social rules and rituals in this way: Don't look at anything improper; don't listen to anything improper; don't say anything improper; don't do anything improper" (12.1). Confucius tells us that at seventy he could "follow all the desires of his heart without breaking any rules" (*Analects* 2.4), because all the rules had become constitutive of his self. As a result, all the desires that were fully his ("internal" to him) were now virtuous ones, in the sense that they were always in conformity with social rules and rituals. In other words, he had turned all the improper desires into "external" ones, and all the proper desires into "internal" ones. This is very similar to Harry Frankfurt's view that "there is something a person can do" to turn certain desires into external ones: "He places the rejected desires outside the scope of his preference, so that it is not a candidate for satisfaction at all" (Frankfurt 1988: 67; also see 159–76).

For the Daoists, since they do not make a distinction between the mind and the body, their spiritual exercises include mental as well as bodily exercises such as meditation, chanting, and breathing (Roth 1999). Many later Daoist texts focus mainly on complex techniques for the achievement of the longevity and even the immortality of the body; the early Daoist thought is often reduced to practical manuals for such purposes in later periods (Schipper 1994).

Throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, self-cultivation through spiritual exercise remains a central concern in Confucianism and Daoism, as well as in Buddhism. Partly due to the influence of Daoism and Buddhism, the Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) developed more elaborated theories, as well as richer techniques, of Confucian self-cultivation (Ivanhoe 2000 and 2002). Wang Yangming (1472–1529) (Ivanhoe 2002), the late Ming Neo-Confucian philosopher, came to reject the views of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), another Neo-Confucian philosopher, who emphasized reading as a spiritual exercise. Wang insisted that to be virtuous one only needed to rediscover what has always been there: the heart/mind that is originally good. Some of Wang's followers pushed the idea to its extreme and claimed that one did not need to engage in any book-learning and *li*-observation; spiritual exercise in the end became pure inner mental activity. Partly as a reaction to this trend, there was eventually a resurgence of the "learning of rituals and social rules" (*li-xue*), which eventually came to dominate the mainstream philosophy in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Chow 1994).

Conclusion

One of the most distinctive features of Chinese ethical theories is that they do not have a "hierarchical" structure, with the exception of Legalism. I borrow the term "hierarchical" from Julia Annas: "By hierarchical I mean that some set of notions is taken as basic, and the other elements in the theory are derived from

these basic notions" (Annas 1993: 7). For instance, although Confucian and Daoist ethical theories have consequentialist justifications of their normative claims about the effective power of virtue, the good is not a basic concept from which other elements are derived. Even though they have a consequentialist justification for their virtue politics or *wu-wei* politics, Confucian and Daoist ethical theories do not define virtue in terms of its consequences.

I believe contemporary moral philosophers can benefit greatly if we take seriously the unfamiliar structure of Chinese ethical theories, for they open up possibilities of new configurations of ethical theory. For instance, the Confucians and Daoists show us that it is possible to take seriously what happens in the external world (i.e., being a consequentialist), while at the same time still defining virtue in terms of factors internal to the agent, not in terms of consequences in the external world.

Now let us compare their theories with Julia Driver's "consequentialism," which is one of the ethical theories that have a hierarchical structure. She takes the good as the basic concept, and defines the concept of virtue in terms of it: "A virtue is a character trait that produces more good (in the actual world) than not *systematically*" (2001: 82). Driver says that her externalist definition of virtue preserves "the connection between the agent and the world," and that "what happens matters to morality, and externalist preserves this intuition" (Driver 2001: 70).

The Confucians and Daoists agree with Driver that what happens in the world matters. However, they also want to preserve the internalist definition of virtue. Their solution for the tension between these two approaches is to look for systematic patterns between virtue and its consequences. This empirical approach allows them to map out the real-world configurations of virtue and consequence, and it leads to fruitful theories such as virtue politics or *wu-wei* politics. It seems plausible to regard the relation between virtue and its effect in the external world as an empirical rather than a conceptual one; the fact that virtue might *systematically* produce good consequences does not imply that their relation must be conceptual.

This chapter has provided the reader with a quick glance at Chinese ethical thought. By exploring styles of ethical theories and practices that are interestingly different from ours, combinations of ethical positions that are surprisingly innovative, as well as radical reconfigurations of familiar structures of ethical theory, I hope we have come to view the global landscape of ethical thought in a new light. To echo something Bernard Williams once said about there being too few ethical ideas in contemporary moral philosophy, we may say that "our major problem now is actually that we have not too many but too few" ethical ideas – and I might add styles and structures as well – "and we need to cherish as many as we can" (Williams 1985: 117).

See also Ethics and sentiment (Chapter 10); Hume (Chapter 11); Hegel (Chapter 15); Ethics and Law (Chapter 35); Reasons, values, and morality (Chapter 36); Consequentialism (Chapter 37); Virtue ethics (Chapter 40); Partiality and impartiality

(Chapter 52); Ideals of perfection (Chapter 55); Justice and punishment (Chapter 57); War (Chapter 67).

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