

Me-Knowledge and Effective Agency¹

Hagop Sarkissian

Department of Philosophy
The City University of New York
Baruch College & Graduate Center

Consider the following predicament: A senior colleague (SC) of yours is planning to vote against a junior colleague's (JC) tenure case despite it being meritorious. SC's negative vote will be driven out of spite, in retaliation for a perceived slight by JC regarding the quality and importance of SC's research. Another senior colleague (SC2), closer to SC than you are and therefore well positioned to intervene, is disinclined to do so because SC2 believes that JC was not sufficiently apologetic about the relevant episode, and did not do enough to make amends. JC thinks the situation is overblown and has no interest in talking to SC, which might (at any rate) simply inflame tensions. SC has started suggesting to other members of the tenure committee that JC should not be granted tenure, and that they should simply commit to a new search. Even if SC fails to persuade them and the tenure case is eventually successful, the negative vote(s) would lead to longstanding bitterness within the relatively small department, making it a less hospitable place for everyone concerned.

As a junior member of the department and a team player you would like to avoid this outcome as much as possible. You believe SC to be a good person who would come to regret the negative vote in due course, but you are not close to SC and are unsure how to proceed. You are friendly with SC2, and feel confident that SC2 sees JC's tenure case as otherwise meritorious, but your relationship is not close enough to permit any direct entreaties for SC2 to get involved. There is also the fact that you yourself are on the tenure-track and do not want to jeopardize your own case down the road.

It is clear to you that the best thing would be for SC to make amends with JC and vote in favor of tenure. What's more, it seems possible that a certain form of intervention could yield this result. You mull over the available courses of action, but they are numerous and it is not clear which route to take. Whom do you approach, and

¹ Forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology (Volume VII)*, edited by Julianne Chung (Oxford University Press).

how? What tone should you take? When would be the best time? Do you make a personal visit, write an email, or invite them out to coffee or dinner?

Texts in the classical Chinese philosophical tradition are replete with discussions of such cases—where persons interact with one another in well-defined roles under what we might loosely refer to as normative hierarchical structures. These structures set parameters for appropriate interactions and therefore shape and constrain the ways individuals interact. Several of these texts (stemming from the chaotic years spanning the Warring States period, ca. 475-221 BCE) maintain that seeing one's way through such situations and settling on a course of action can be facilitated by a particular kind of self-knowledge. It is not knowledge about one's beliefs or values, still less knowledge of one's own mental states. Instead, these texts emphasize that being an effective ethical agent—one who can foster cohesion and cooperation and make positive impacts on others—hinges on one's ability to make plausible first-pass predictions of how others are likely to react to one's interventions. One must know not simply the warrant of one's reasons but also how they will be received by others when issued forth in one's voice and from one's person. Such knowledge allows one to conscientiously modify one's presentation and manner to yield the ethically preferable result.² In short, effective agency is enhanced as one comes to know one's person in a particular way—knowing how one's person is experienced by others. This is the 'me' as seen from the perspective of a particular other, and so I'll use the term *perspectival self-knowledge* or more simply *me-knowledge* to refer to this sort of knowledge. Such knowledge can be acquired through experimentation, observation, reflection, and soliciting others' input. And, these texts argue, it is central to the project of leading an effective life.

In the first section, I characterize what I mean by effective agency and provide context for why some early Confucian texts were especially concerned with it—namely, owing to their standing commitment to arbitrate disagreements and re-establish harmony within (often hierarchical) groups. Next, I explain why me-knowledge was vital in making good on this commitment, and then outline the central methods of cultivating it. In the final section, I show how other schools of thought during the same time period found the notion problematic, focusing on a probing and

² Throughout I will be referring to ethical or moral outcomes, as these were the focus of the Confucian texts. But everything I say will be applicable to any of one's projects more generally.

perspicacious critique found in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, a text in the Daoist tradition of thought.

I - Groups and the Problem of Effective Arbitration

The tenure case can be viewed as of a general type, where one is confident that outcome X is highly desirable given one's values and commitments, yet realizing X requires buy-in from others who are, to some degree or other, disinclined to realize X. It is important to note that in such cases X is neither antithetical to generally recognized values nor idiosyncratic in objectionable ways. In the current case, for example, the values that one wishes to promote are justice on the one hand (as JC merits tenure) and harmony on the other (as having well-functioning working relationships is preferable for all, other things being equal). Both values would be promoted if SC reverses course and votes in favor of JC's tenure case. As things stand, however, X will not be realized. One can, of course, blame the parties involved for being unwilling to take action and simply standing by while things unfold disastrously. Yet the very possibility of changing this course of events by nudging the group back toward more cooperative dynamics is a burden that can impel one to intervene.

Indeed, this aspect of Confucianism is broadly consequentialist, as it values the realization of harmonious states of affairs. Thus, even if one is not directly implicated in the current situation, this does not relieve one of the burden to try to intervene—if, that is, one can see a way to move the individuals toward the desired state of affairs. In short, if one can make an impact, one should. In a famous paper, Bernard Williams (1973) notes that these thoughts arise whenever one focuses on realizing valued states of affairs, or consequences.

Consequentialism is basically indifferent to whether a state of affairs consists in what I do, or is produced by what I do, where that notion is itself wide enough to include, for instance, situations in which other people do things which I have made them do, or allowed them to do, or encouraged them to do, or given them a chance to do. All that consequentialism is interested in is the idea of these doings being *consequences* of what I do, and that is a relation broad enough to include the relations just mentioned, and many others...

Correspondingly, there is no relevant difference which consists *just* in a state of affairs being brought about by me, without intervention of other agents,

and another being brought about through the intervention of other agents...
Granted that the states of affairs have been adequately described in causally
and evaluatively relevant terms, it makes no further comprehensible difference
who produces them... (Williams, 1973, pp. 93–95)³

Such considerations loom for the Confucian ethical agent, who seeks to achieve a level of optimal harmony amongst competing perspectives and diverging personalities (e.g. Angle, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 2004). Given this commitment, an ever-present question when confronted with hostility, ill will, or resentment is ‘what can I do to help restore harmony in this group, considering that I am not at fault?’. The question arises from the perspective of a group member who is positioned to intervene, yet remains a number of links removed from what brought about the crisis.

One might think: discovering an ethically desirable outcome backed with justifying reasons is the best way to gain others’ assent or cooperation, allowing them to endorse the course of action themselves without requiring any further prompting or special intervention. While this is hard to deny in theory, gaining assent in practice will often require far more than presenting compelling reasons. After all, what may be an optimal result by one’s own lights may involve disutility for others in the form of material or social costs, or the abnegation of some values or principles. Getting them to yield by dint of laying out the reasons favoring one’s own preferred course of action may not counterbalance—from *their* perspective—the costs they would bear in doing so. In the face of such resistance, what is required is to get them to shift their perspectives, reassure them against doubt, or otherwise move them on a different tack. As David Wong notes, it may involve getting them to see that “a partial compensation for yielding is that a central part of that individual’s good lies in the relationships with those others” (Wong, 2020). It may also involve approaching familiar people in unfamiliar ways, making inquiries about sensitive matters, or enlisting the help of those

³ While there are real connections here, it is unclear whether the early Confucians would endorse the strong notion of ‘negative responsibility’ that Williams claims to be an entailment of consequentialism. One reason why is that Confucians thought certain actions and interventions were the prerogative of individuals occupying certain roles, such that it would simply be inappropriate in at least some cases for a person to get involved at all. In such cases, one would not be held responsible for inaction. In other words, one would not bear negative responsibility.

whose discretion, trustworthiness, or reasonableness are uncertain. Importantly, the particular ways that one does so may be crucial; it will matter what tone one takes, what time one chooses to intervene, or what precise language one adopts (Robertson, 2019; Sarkissian, 2010b). One's first moves, for example, will often play an oversized role.

Put another way, given diverging values (or even different weightings of shared values) persons may reasonably reject the normative force of the desired outcome X in favor of another state of affairs, Y, *even if X is, by their own lights*, something otherwise desirable. As Antonio Cua has written, in such cases the Confucian ethical agents work to shift perspectives and give salience to some value or good that is presumed to be already shared.

In argumentative context, personal, ideal embedded principles may... be an articulation of the participant's understanding of the inherited core of common ethical knowledge, that is, the knowledge of those operative standards of conduct plausibly presumed to be a matter of conventional wisdom. Since such a presumption is defeasible, each participant carries a burden of reasonable persuasion in advocating her principles as "the" correct or sound interpretation of what is deemed implicit in common ethical knowledge. It is to be expected that there will be an absence of agreement or even disagreement among competent participants in their understanding of the import of ethical knowledge for a case at hand. (276)

Put another way, there are often multiple equally acceptable ways of resolving dilemmas, with no uniquely correct solution that recommends itself over and above all others, and so it would be unrealistic to view one's own solution as having uniquely effective normative force that will impel others' agreement. After all, *any* group of individuals with a protracted history will have some things on which they will not converge, some perspectives that will not align. As Kongzi (also known as Confucius, fl. ca. 6th century BCE) states:

We may study together with some yet be ill suited to pursue a *dao* with them; we may be well suited to pursue a *dao* with some yet be unable to attain rank with them; we may attain rank with some yet be unable to agree on how to

properly weigh conflicting ethical considerations. 可與共學，未可與適道；可與適道，未可與立；可與立，未可與權。 *Analects* 9.30⁴

Lack of agreement abounds even among those who share much in common, which is indeed *preferable* to full agreement or unity. “The Master said: The *junzi* harmonizes—he does not seek agreement; the petty person does precisely the opposite” 子曰：「君子和而不同，小人同而不和。」 (*Analects* 13.23). Here and in other early Confucian texts, the term *junzi* [pronounced jooon-ds] refers to a person of integrity, ethical insight, and skill, esteemed by others and a model of wisdom and humaneness. Such a person does not seek to unify all perspectives, or to adjudicate among them to find out which are correct or false. Instead, the *junzi* seeks to accommodate and even foster the uniqueness of different perspectives to allow for individual expression and make use of the complementarity afforded by competing views. Antonio Cua (1989) has characterized this commitment in Confucian ethics as akin to a form of ethical arbitration.

At issue in arbitration is an impartial resolution of disputes oriented toward the reconciliation of the contending parties in the light of the concern for harmonious human intercourse. The arbitrator, chosen by the parties in dispute, is concerned with repairing the rupture of human relationships rather than with deciding the rights or wrongs of the parties.⁵ The task of an arbitrator is... to shape the expectations of the contending parties along the line of mutual concern, to get them to appreciate one another as interacting members in a community. (281)

⁴ All translations are my own, following traditional numbering. ‘Weighing conflicting ethical considerations’ is my way of parsing a single character in the Chinese— *quan* 權 (pronounced ‘chwhen’). It refers to an ability to appropriately accommodate conflicts in values, norms, or other ethically relevant considerations. More specifically, it refers to an ability to know when to deviate from ritually proper conduct (or *li* 禮) because the impropriety engendered thereby will be balanced out by some other more pressing moral need.

⁵ Cua characterizes the arbitrator as *chosen* by the disputing parties, and this might suggest that the parties themselves agree to choose someone. In present case, it is better to think of a person being ‘acceptable’ to both parties (if the person offers to intervene).

How to do so? One must leverage what one knows about how one impacts others and thereby choose a course that moves them toward a stance of accommodation, which Wong sees as including

an epistemic openness and preparedness to expand one's conception of the good and the right upon further understanding and appreciation of other ways of life; a willingness to act on one's own moral positions in ways that minimize or reduce potential damage to one's broader relationships to others who have opposing positions; and a willingness to compromise at least sometimes on what one might have achieved in realizing one's moral position for the sake of sustaining broader relationships with disagreeing others. (Wong, 2006, p. 6 see also chapter 9)

The value of accommodation in the context of interpersonal (and especially protracted) relationships is obvious. So even while an accommodating attitude might not seem forthcoming, there may be ways to intervene to make it a live option.

As I argue in the next section, when confronted with such situations where one must change another's perspective to nudge toward a more accommodating stance, one must first consider and understand the numerous factors that might be working to shape their perspective and then see a way to have an impactful intervention with them. Me-knowledge, as I characterize it, follows from the conscientious taking of another's perspective on oneself, seeing not only how another person experiences the current situation, but also how one might appear to them as a potential arbiter.

II - Me-knowledge

In the tenure case, the problem can be resolved in many ways: by SC being moved directly by one's entreaties; by SC2 being swayed to intervene with SC; by JC resolving to make a gesture of reconciliation toward SC; or several other possibilities. Which person is more likely to be receptive? Where does one stand to make the most impact? Successful arbitration (or effective agency) in these types of cases requires *me-knowledge*— knowing, with some degree of confidence, how others will react to one's interventions in the relevant context.

But how can one be confident in such predictions? A first step, according to the Confucian view, is to gather what we might call *them*-knowledge—to consider what role the person is currently occupying, how that role may be shaping their relations to others, their history in that role, and other factors that might influence relations of power among the persons involved. These should be considered alongside any standing motivations, desires, and overall values one might take them to have in context. Beyond these, we are told to be attuned to more specific information that can only be gleaned when directly interacting with them, including the person’s current mood and state of mind (Sarkissian, 2010a). These aspects are captured by the notion of *shu* 恕 (pronounced ‘shoo’) or conscientious perspective taking.

As is often noted, the word *shu* 恕 consists of two components: *ru* 如 on top, meaning ‘liken to’ or ‘resemble’, and *xin* 心 on the bottom, meaning ‘mind’ (sometimes translated as heart-mind)—the seat of affect, cognition, and volition. Likening oneself to others, putting oneself in their shoes and imagining how things would seem from their perspective is described as the method of ‘humaneness’ (*ren* 仁) (6.30). It helps one avoid offense and harm, which risks closing off the possibility of harmonizing. As Kwong-loi Shun writes, *shu* “has to do with potentially negative conditions of an individual in that the contemplated treatment from which I should refrain is either unwelcome to the individual or not in her interest” (Shun, 2014, p. 269). A famous formulation along these lines occurs in *Analects* 15.24:

“Zigong asked ‘Is there a single word that might serve a guide for one’s entire life?’ The Master said, ‘Wouldn’t that be *shu* (恕)? What you do not desire do not impose on others” (15,24; see also 4.15, 5.12).

But this conscientious perspective taking is only half the picture. For in several passages *shu* appears alongside another term *zhong* (忠, pronounced roughly ‘johng’) which elsewhere means ‘loyalty’ yet here means something like thoughtful diligence or “being honest with oneself in dealing with others” (Goldin, 2008). One cannot be *zhong* without first exercising *shu*, since one must first conscientiously consider the perspective of the other and only then will one know how to act oneself.⁶ The

⁶ For more on the relationship between these concepts, see Chan (2000), Fingarette (1979), and Ivanhoe (1990).

‘Application of Centeredness’ (*Zhongyong* 中庸) chapter of the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記), an early anthology of Confucian writings, helps fill in this picture.

The Master said, "A *dao* should not set people apart. If you follow a *dao* that sets people apart, it cannot be taken as [an appropriate] *dao*....⁷ The *junzi* governs persons taking them as they are, and stops [any involvement] once they've responded appropriately. *Zhong* and *shu* thus cannot be separate from *dao*: what you would not be willing to have done to you, do not impose it on others. The *junzi's* *dao* comprises four things, and I have yet to prove capable of even one: To serve my father as I would expect a son to serve me, I have proved incapable. To serve my prince as I would expect a minister to serve me, I have proved incapable. To serve my elder brother as I would expect a younger brother to serve me, I have proved incapable. To take the lead and favor friends as I would expect them to favor me, I have proved incapable.

子曰：道不遠人。人之為道而遠人，不可以為道。故君子以人治人，改而止。忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不愿，亦勿施於人。君子之道四，丘未能一焉：所求乎子以事父，未能也；所求乎臣以事君，未能也；所求乎弟以事兄，未能也；所求乎朋友先施之，未能也。

Let us focus here on the first of four relational pairings mentioned— namely, father and son. What is demanded here is not that a *junzi*, having considered how he would like his own son to act toward him, then act in that very same way toward his father (a common reading). Nor is it saying that a *junzi* must, more simply, conform to the

⁷ I read the verb *yuan* (distant/far) as transitive in both sentences, with *ren* (people) as its object— thus, ‘to distance others’ or ‘regard them as distant’ (hence my ‘set people apart’). This seems appropriate given the syntax as well as the context of the rest of the passage. Some read *yuan* as stative (or adjectival) instead, describing the *dao*, e.g.: ‘The Master said, “*Dao* is not far from people. If a person’s enactment of *dao* were far from people, it could not be regarded as *dao*”’ (Hagen, 2018, p. 240). Others treat *yuan* differently in each sentence— stative (or adjectival) in the first, transitive in the second: ‘The Master said, “The proper way (*dao* 道) is not at all remote from people. If someone takes as the way that which distances them from others, it should not be considered the proper way”’ (Ames, 2001, p. 94; see also W.-T. Chan, 1963, p. 100; Gardner, 2007, p. 116). My thanks to Myeong-seok Kim for asking how my interpretation relates to others in the literature.

general norms of comportment appropriate to the father-child relationship (as demanded by ritual propriety). Instead, in order to serve one's father appropriately, what is demanded here is that one take the perspective of one's own father and then see *what is called for from that perspective*. If one is unable to take one's father's perspective— if one is unable to understand *how one appears to one's father in particular*— one will be ineffective in shaping one's relationship with him in one's preferred direction.⁸

Me-knowledge is what results from this process of adopting others' perspectives on oneself. It may often include some broad generalizations or widely accepted norms governing one's relationship with the other in the relevant context— such as the father-son relationship above. Ritual propriety (*li* 禮, pronounced 'lee') provides these norms (Sarkissian, 2014). However, these general norms require interpretation and discretion in practice, which includes imaginatively putting oneself in the other's (contextual) shoes.⁹ This kind of know-how allows one to start seeing the perspectival 'me'.

What is *yi* 義 (pronounced 'ee') or appropriate for me to do is, at the end of the day, highly contextual. As Wong writes,

The Confucian concept of *yi* 義 is often translated as 'rightness', but this requires the proviso that the connotation should be that of appropriateness or fittingness. The connotation builds context into the notion of rightness. Something is right in the sense that it fits the situation at hand, in the way that how one makes soup must be fitted to the particular ingredients one has... [H]armony among human beings is not static but an activity of harmonizing that requires continuous mutual adjustment of the interests of individuals to each other... What constitutes a satisfactory adjustment cannot be specified

⁸ It should be noted that the me-knowledge I outline here likely rests upon a presumed notion of neurotypicality, including faculties that might not be as well developed in some persons as they are in others. I am grateful to Alec Scully for pointing this out.

⁹ My thanks to Alec Scully for helping me separate these two different kinds of knowledge, both of which are crucial to personal efficacy: the general prevailing norms of acceptable behavior as well as how (or even whether) they ought to be enacted in the relevant context. The relative importance of each will vary from context to context.

independently of the particular interests at stake and the present and future nature of the relationships of all the relevant parties. (Wong, 2020)

III - Acquiring Me-knowledge

It might be expected, then, that me-knowledge can only be gained through lived experience—gaining experience of others’ perspectives and how one might figure in them. And this is indeed what we find in these sources. A range of previous observation points naturally disinclines one from undertaking steps that are unlikely to yield success while also pulling one in the direction of what is, based on lived experience, most likely to work. Many passages of the *Analects*, for example, note that becoming a better person means coming to know such facts about oneself and how one influences others. We are told of three things that a *junzi* values most: “By altering his own demeanor he avoids violence and arrogance [by others]; by rectifying his own countenance he welcomes trustworthiness [by others]; through his own words and tone of voice he avoids vulgarity and impropriety [by others]” (8.4).¹⁰ This passage connects details of the *junzi*’s observable behavior to that of others, suggesting that they are tightly correlated.

Peers, colleagues, and friends are particularly important sources of insight (e.g. 1.4, 1.7, 1.8, 9.25), and reflecting on them was something Kongzi obviously relished and found edifying (e.g. 1.15, 3.8).¹¹ They can, for example, observe how others react to oneself and therefore provide insights that are otherwise allusive from one’s own perspective. Kongzi himself is often depicted as providing insight into his students’

¹⁰ I interpret 8.4 alongside other passages (such as 10.25, 12.1, 12.5, 13.4, 14.42, 16.10) that show the importance of modifying one’s behavior in response to others and thereby putting them at ease. For discussion, see Sarkissian (2010b). An alternative reading of these lines maintains that altering one’s demeanor is a way to avoid *being* violent and arrogant, that rectifying one’s countenance is a way of *being* trustworthy, and that minding one’s words and tone of voice is a way of *not being* vulgar and improper *to others*. My thanks to Myeong-seok Kim for asking how my interpretation relates to others in the literature.

¹¹ My thanks to Karyn Lai for emphasizing the importance of the peer relationship in acquiring accurate me-knowledge.

abilities— what they are capable of pulling off and where they will likely fall short (e.g. 11.22).¹²

Ultimately, though, one must be committed to understanding how one affects others through careful observation of one's own behavior— especially when one encounters difficulties. Consider *Mengzi* 4B28, which discusses this idea in some detail. The passage begins by making general claims about how to treat others and how such treatment is reciprocated in kind.

A humane person loves others; a person with a sense of propriety respects others. One who loves others is loved in turn, one who respects others is respected in turn.

仁者愛人，有禮者敬人。愛人者人恆愛之，敬人者人恆敬之。

This claim is both descriptive (about what tends to occur) as well as prescriptive (how one ought to act). (The enthymematic premise is something like a conditional: If you want to be a humane person, then...)

The passage then considers what one can reasonably infer if one is *not* in fact loved by others, or *not* treated with due consideration. The chain of reasoning is analogous to *modus tollens*: If I treat this person with respect, I will be respected in turn. But this person is not treating me respectfully. Might *I* have failed to convey respect?

Suppose someone were to treat one in outrageous fashion. A *junzi* would, in such a case, surely examine his own person, thinking: “It must be that I wasn’t benevolent; it must be that I lacked propriety. How else could such a thing have come about?” But if, after examining his person, he finds he had been humane, he had acted with propriety, and yet the person still treats him outrageously, then the *junzi* will again be certain to examine his own person, thinking “I must have failed to be diligent.” But if he finds that he was, in fact, conscientious, and

¹² However, such knowledge gleaned ahead of time may be insufficient for dealing with how the other will react in the moment, and so a *junzi* must make spontaneous inductive inferences and be attuned to the moment; acting on me-knowledge thus involves some improvisational skill (Lai, 2012; Sarkissian, 2010a).

the person still treats him outrageously, only then would the *junzi* say, “I suppose he is the incorrigible one.” (*Mengzi* 4B:28)

有人於此，其待我以橫逆，則君子必自反也：我必不仁也，必無禮也，此物奚宜至哉？其自反而仁矣，自反而有禮矣，其橫逆由是也，君子必自反也：我必不忠。自反而忠矣，其橫逆由是也，君子曰：此亦妄人也已矣。

The *junzi* sees how others treat him as a function of his own behavior— a kind of conditional prediction: A will do x if I do y (Morton, 2002; Sarkissian, 2010b). They examine and reflect on how they might have engendered the harsh treatment in question (Sarkissian, 2015, 2017). There is a phrase— ‘seeking its source from oneself’ (*qiu zhu ji* 求諸己)— that may be especially relevant here.¹³

Mengzi said, “If one cares for others and they do not respond with affection, one should revert and examine the humaneness [in one’s care]; if one governs people and they are not well ordered, one should revert and examine the wisdom [in one’s governing]; if one behaves with propriety yet others do not respond appropriately, one should revert and examine the reverence [in one’s propriety]. In one’s comportment whenever there are those who do not requite, in every case one must revert and *seek the source of this in oneself*— for when one’s person is rectified the rest of the world follows it.” (*Mengzi* 4A4)

孟子曰：愛人不親反其仁，治人不治反其智，禮人不答反其敬。行有不得者，皆反求諸己，其身正而天下歸之。

Kongzi said, “A *junzi* seeks its source from himself; a petty person seeks its source in others.” (*Analects* 15.21)

子曰：君子求諸己，小人求諸人。

Such passages enjoin readers to better understand how others may be experiencing and interpreting their behavior— how their demeanor, actions, and mere presence might be affecting others. Over time, this would help one avoid awkwardness, friction, hesitation, and doubt, paving the way toward accommodation, cooperation, and even trust. This is how one acquires me-knowledge.

¹³ My thanks to Karyn Lai for pointing this out.

Finally, perspectival me-knowledge is motivated by a desire to achieve congruence between one's ends and values on the one hand, and how these are conveyed through one's person on the other. Congruence facilitates interpretability; one should care about me-knowledge from the very drive one has to interact with others— namely, the desire to communicate and to be understood (Velleman, 2015). Congruity here is not with a core, underlying, unchanging 'true' self, but rather with the 'me' in this context, with these persons and relationships— here and now. We aim for congruity generally by realizing it across several particulars.

IV - Lacking Perspective, Lacking Me-Knowledge

Of course, there are downsides to becoming concerned about 'me'. For example, we find clues in the *Analects* suggesting that a *junzi*'s desire to seek harmony may go too far, leading them to accommodate persons who have no interest in being accommodating themselves (e.g. *Analects* 6.26). Moreover, excessive attention on oneself and how one might appear to others can lead one to become glib, aloof, or priggish in their eyes, thus undermining one's desire to be seen as trustworthy or upright instead (Sarkissian, forthcoming).¹⁴ In the pages of the *Mozi*, a text from a rival school of social reformers, we find Kongzi depicted as wholly consumed by his dazzling presence and impeccable decorum, while neglecting the project of actually reforming others' behavior and making changes for the good.¹⁵

In this section, though, I focus on a different kind of critique, one that highlights the dangers in failing to engage in *shu* (conscientious perspective taking) and inhabiting the other's perspective, and instead focusing on the rightness of one's position and the attractiveness of one's preferred outcome— taking these to be so obvious as to only require stating them aloud to have others yield. One might, for example, assume that one's values are shared and only require articulation, or that one's judgment is sound and so will be taken as authoritative by others who might, in fact, have no interest in hearing it. In such cases, one risks losing efficacy precisely because one imagines oneself as more persuasive or compelling than can be reasonably expected were one truly to adopt the other's perspective.

¹⁴ See Sarkissian (forthcoming) for further elaboration of this theme.

¹⁵ See especially the 'Against the Confucians II' (Fei Ru Xia 非儒下) chapter in Johnston (2009).

The most probing and damning critique along these lines can be found in the *Zhuangzi* (pronounced 'jwong-ds'), an anthology of early Daoist literature. In a fictitious dialogue that opens Chapter Four "In the World of Men" (*renjianshi* 人間世), Kongzi reproaches his exceptional student Yan Hui for asking a leave of absence in order to go and reform the callous ruler of the state of Wei. Yan Hui adverts to all the right reasons for undertaking this mission: the ruler is cruel, his people are dying in large numbers owing to his neglect, and someone needs to go do something about it. Yan Hui resolves to be that someone. Nonetheless, Kongzi pushes back, questioning not only his motives but also his methods and his chances for success. He notes that 1) Yan Hui is not yet virtuous himself, so he should have no time to go lecture others, and 2) Yan Hui is likely (perhaps even unconsciously) motivated by desires for fame and repute (which can be had by bravely attempting to reform such a heartless sovereign), even if his desire to ameliorate the plight of Wei's people is genuine.

A key theme throughout this dialogue is Yan Hui's continual focus on himself—his knowledge, erudition, skills, and commitment—all while failing to appreciate how he, this person Yan Hui, would appear to the king from the king's own perspective—a powerful, complex, and dynamic individual on whose terms they will be meeting. In effect, the dialogue suggests that one's wholehearted commitment to realizing the good may, perversely, *undermine* one's ability to have efficacy 'in the world of [actual] persons' (as the chapter title states).¹⁶ Kongzi concludes that Yan Hui will lack effective agency and accomplish nothing save annoying the ruler and dicing with death.

Suppose your virtuosity (*de* 德) is ample, your sincerity firm, yet you fail to probe his mood; suppose you go in without reputation for being pugnacious, yet fail to earnestly search his mind; suppose you then go on to preach humaneness and rightness using artful speech right in the tyrant's face—well, you'd just be making yourself look good by making him look bad [by comparison]. That's what's called plaguing others—and he who plagues others will surely be plagued in return. It seems you're in danger of being plagued!

¹⁶ For another interpretation of this famous passage that resonates with my own in many respects (while departing in others), see Chong (2016).

且德厚信矜，未達人氣；名聞不爭，未達人心。而彊以仁義繩墨之言術暴人之前者，是以人惡有其美也，命之曰蓄人。蓄人者，人必反蓄之，若殆為人蓄夫！
(4/9/4-6)¹⁷

(‘Probing his mood’ and ‘searching his mind’ are the kinds of things one does when engaging in *shu*.) Kongzi then asks Yan Hui to share his plans for dealing with this eventuality, only to have Yan Hui once again affirm his fixation on himself. “Exact and upright,” he answers, “yet remaining empty and unassuming. Diligent in effort, with singular focus. Would that work?” 端而虛，勉而一，則可乎 (4/9/14)? Yan Hui’s instincts are to pay attention to his commitments and bearing to see whether they measure up to his ideals of conduct. Kongzi is unmoved.

“No, no! How could that ever work? This man you are describing would stand out as overflowing with aggressive resolve (*yang* 陽), his complexion would be unsettled as he tries to constantly dwell in what others find acceptable, manipulating their feelings while seeking to ease their minds. Even a so-called ‘gradually progressing virtuosity’ cannot take hold, never mind anything grander than that. He will remain fixed in his ways and wholly unreformed. Outwardly he might play along yet remain unmoved within. How could that work?”

曰：「惡！惡可？夫以陽為充孔揚，采色不定，常人之所不違，因案人之所感，以求容與其心。名之曰日漸之德不成，而況大德乎！將執而不化，外合而內不訾，其庸詎可乎！」 (4/9/14-16)

Yan Hui tries once again to gain Kongzi’s approval, but what he says is doubly disappointing. First, he claims that he will remain pure and committed within, confident in his standing, though on the outside he will bow and kneel to signal his inferior social standing and avoid causing offense. Second, he claims that he will indeed criticize the tyrant, but his criticisms will be couched—and therefore cloaked—in stock sayings of antiquity and oral tradition. These boilerplate and rote examples will allow him to avoid triggering the ruler’s ire as he will only be invoking commonly accepted truisms. “The words will really be criticisms and remonstrations, but they’ll be those of the

¹⁷ Translations of the *Zhuangzi* are my own, though I’ve referred to Graham (2001), Kjellberg (2005), and Ziporyn (2009) to get through the tougher bits. Citations are to the standard ICS concordance.

ancients, not mine!” 其言雖教，謫之實也。古之有也，非吾有也。(4/9/21-22) Kongzi’s response is telling.

“No, no! How could that ever work? You have a great multitude of policies, but your means are uninformed by reconnaissance. Although this might well allow you to get by without being faulted, that’s about all you’ll accomplish. How could it have any effect on the tyrant? You are still taking your made-up mind as your instructor.”

惡！惡可？大多政，法而不諫，雖固，亦無罪。雖然，止是耳矣，夫胡可以及化！猶師心者也。(4/9/25-26)

Let us take stock. Yan Hui is, on the one hand, doing what he thinks he should be doing: he is heeding his teacher’s advice to adhere to the strictures of ritual propriety in all dealings (e.g. *Analects* 12.1) and is singularly focused on promoting benevolence. His intentions are sincere. His reasons sound. However, precisely *because* he is overflowing with such thoughts, aims, and desires, he is being guided by his made-up mind, making it his master (*you shi xin zhe ye* 猶師心者也) and is wholly (and tragically) lacking in perspectival *me-knowledge* that is facilitated through taking the ruler’s perspective on his own person—seeing how he (Yan Hui) will appear to *him*.¹⁸ Thus, according to Kongzi, he cannot hope to find efficacy in his self-appointed (and precarious) mission.

Yan Hui is at his wit’s end. “I have nothing left to put forward. Dare I ask what I should do?” Kongzi tells him that to find efficacy he must forget his plans, intentions, merits, and virtues—all of them. Yan Hui’s first step must be to ‘fast’ (*zhai* 齋) his

¹⁸ Moeller and D’Ambrosio (2017) offer a reading that complements my own: “Confucius here exposes a central aspect of the hypocrisy involved in the Confucian sincerity project: one’s desire for the dual correspondence between one’s actions and character and one’s performance and (good) name implies a mutual confirmation of one’s own persona and one’s social recognition. One thereby not only defines oneself by socially constructed values but also presupposes that the goodness society will eventually ascribe to oneself reflects one’s true personal goodness. By verifying social values, one thus intends to ultimately verify oneself. But this self-verification emerges paradoxically from an insincere desire to do and affirm that which is deemed good by society only in order to be acclaimed and considered—including by oneself—as sincerely good” (143).

mind— that is, to empty himself from his mind and position himself to respond in the moment with his *qi*— the vital energy that can perceive and respond to the situation unblinkered by previous thoughts.

“The ears stop at what they hear. The mind stops when it finds what matches its intention. But *qi* is empty and unassuming, awaiting upon things (to move). Your only way forward (*dao* 道) will settle in this newfound emptiness. This is the fasting of the mind.”

无聽之以耳而聽之以心，无聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。¹⁹ (4/10/1-3)

Yan Hui has a realization: “Before receiving this instruction— *that* Hui was full of Hui. Having now received it—there is yet to be a Hui. Is this what you mean by ‘emptiness?’” 回之未始得使，實自回也；得使之也，未始有回也。可謂虛乎 “Precisely!”, Kongzi exclaims. “I tell you: You can then go wander freely in his cage without letting his reputation get to you. If you can get inside him, sing your song. If not, let it be. No schooling; no prescriptions.” 吾語若！若能入遊其樊而无感其名，入則鳴，不入則止。无門无毒。(4/10/3-5)²⁰

It is difficult to pin down exactly what Kongzi means when he tells Yan Hui to listen with the *qi* (vital energy). However, the general tenor of his remarks is undeniable: the more Yan Hui fixes his attention on himself the more he’ll be blinded in his attempts to attend to others. The more he compares his conduct to ideals the more he will fail to think of others, see them for who they are, and see himself through their eyes. Without such perspective taking he will never attain me-knowledge. He will never realize that if the tyrant were the kind of person to be impressed by erudition and moral entreaties and receptive to the council of learned scholars, he wouldn’t need Yan Hui to begin with! Only a mental fast— a release of all of his preconceived plans— can allow him to see himself through the tyrant’s eyes and therefore engage with the

¹⁹ Ziporyn suggests that Zhuangzi may implicitly be targeting thinkers who claim that one should follow doctrines (like Gaozi) or seek guidance from within (like Mengzi) when trying to settle on what to do (Ziporyn, 2009, pp. 228, n45). The message here is to turn one’s attention to reality, to the hear-and-now.

²⁰ I follow Kjellberg in my reading of the last line, which has proved vexing for many commentators. See, e.g., the long list of interpretations in Cui (2012, pp. 139–141).

tyrant on the tyrant's own terms. Even if he is ineffective, he might yet avoid plaguing the tyrant, and being plagued in return. That's no mean thing.

Conclusion

Me-knowledge promotes interpretability only when it is genuine—when one can conscientiously take the perspective of others and see oneself as one appears to them. This is difficult. Cringe-inducing audio recordings ("Did I really sound like that?") or video recordings ("Why was I slouching so much? Why did I look so distant?") are often potent reminders that how others experience us might escape our own attention. So while we may worry that others do not see us as we truly are—that the way they experience or interpret our behavior is laden with bias and misunderstanding—the reverse is also true.

Put another way, I may think that I know the perspectival 'me'—how I sound, how I appear, what the tone of my voice and the arch of my eyebrow convey to the person at hand. But whatever knowledge I have in these regards will be imperfect in some both obvious and non-obvious ways. All the more reason to get to know 'me' better.²¹

References

- Ames, R. T. (2001). *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Angle, S. C. (2008). No supreme principle: Confucianism's harmonization of multiple values. *Dao*, 7(1), 35–40.
- Chan, S. Y. (2000). Can Shu be the one word that serves as the guiding principle of caring actions? *Philosophy East & West*, 50(4), 507–524.
- Chan, W.-T. (1963). *A Source-Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Chong, K.-C. (2016). *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*. SUNY Press.

²¹ Audiences at the University of Vermont, the University at Buffalo, and California State University, Fullerton helped provide feedback on these ideas during the course of their development. Special thanks to Nic Bommarito, Aram Kang, Ryan Nichols, and Alec Scully for helpful discussion, and to Julianne Chung, Myeong-seok Kim, Karyn Lai, David Santamaria Legarda, and David Wong for helpful comments on previous drafts.

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004). *Material Virtue*. Brill Academic Publishers.
- Cua, A. S. (1989). The status of principles in Confucian ethics. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 16(3-4), 273–296.
- Cui, D. 崔大華. (2012). *莊子歧解*. 中华书局.
- Fingarette, H. (1979). Following the “one thread” of the “Analects.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. *American Academy of Religion*, 47(3, ThematicS.), 373–405.
- Gardner, D. K. (2007). *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition*. Hackett Publishing.
- Goldin, P. R. (2008). When zhong 忠 does not mean “loyalty.” *Dao*, 7(2), 165–174.
- Graham, A. C. (2001). *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Hackett Publishing.
- Hagen, K. (2018). Zhong Yong 中庸: “Excellence in the Ordinary.” In K. Hagen & S. Coutinho (Eds.), *Philosophers of the Warring States: A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (pp. 235–245). Broadview Press.
- Ivanhoe, P. J. (1990). Reweaving the “one thread” of the *Analects*. *Philosophy East & West*, 40(1), 17–33.
- Johnston, I. (2009). *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*. Chinese University Press.
- Kjellberg, P. (2005). Zhuangzi. In P. J. Ivanhoe & B. W. Van Norden (Eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (2nd ed., pp. 207–254). Seven Bridges New York.
- Lai, K. L. (2012). Knowing to act in the moment: examples from Confucius’ *Analects*. *Asian Philosophy*, 22(4), 347–364.
- Moeller, H.-G., & D’Ambrosio, P. J. (2017). *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*. Columbia University Press.
- Morton, A. (2002). *The Importance of Being Understood: Folk Psychology as Ethics*. Routledge.
- Robertson, S. (2019). Nunchi, Ritual, and Early Confucian Ethics. *Dao*, 18(1), 23–40.
- Sarkissian, H. (forthcoming). Virtuous contempt (*wu 惡*) in the *Analects*. In J. Tiwald (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Sarkissian, H. (2010a). Confucius and the effortless life of virtue. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 27(1), 1–16.
- Sarkissian, H. (2010b). Minor tweaks, major payoffs: The problems and promise of situationism in moral philosophy. *Philosopher’s Imprint*, 10(9), 1–15.
- Sarkissian, H. (2014). Ritual and rightness in the *Analects*. In A. Olberding (Ed.), *Dao Companion to the Analects* (pp. 95–116). Springer Netherlands.

- Sarkissian, H. (2015). When you think it's bad, it's worse than you think: psychological bias and the ethics of negative character assessments. In B. Bruya (Ed.), *The Philosophical Challenge from China* (pp. 3–22). MIT Press.
- Sarkissian, H. (2017). Situationism, Manipulation, and Objective Self-Awareness. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 20(3), 489–503.
- Shun, K.-L. (2014). Early Confucian Moral Psychology. In V. Shen (Ed.), *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy* (pp. 263–289). Springer Netherlands.
- Velleman, D. J. (2015). *Foundations for Moral Relativism: Second Expanded Edition*. Open Book Publishers.
- Williams, B. (1973). A critique of utilitarianism. In J. J. C. Smart & B. Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (pp. 77–150). Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, D. B. (2006). *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*. Oxford University Press.
- Wong, D. B. (2020). Soup, harmony, and disagreement. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 6(2), 139–155.
- Ziporyn, B. (2009). *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Hackett Publishing.