Well functioning *dao*s and moral relativism*

Hagop Sarkissian
Department of Philosophy
The City University of New York
Graduate Center and Baruch College
hagop.sarkissian@baruch.cuny.edu

What are the nature and status of moral norms? And what makes individuals abide by them? These are central questions in metaethics. The first concerns the nature of the moral domain—for example, whether it exists independently of what individuals or groups think of it. The second concerns the bindingness or practical clout of moral norms—how individuals feel impelled to abide by them.[1] In this paper, I bring two distinct approaches to these questions into dialogue with one another.

The first of these comes from David Velleman, as outlined in his *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Velleman 2013, 2nd edition 2015). He characterizes normativity as consisting of a human drive to understand and be understood, a drive to function as a person among others in one's community and thereby be in communion with them. This drive impels communities of individuals to settle on ordinary ways of being—a set of shared action types or *doables* which allows for mutual interpretation (a prerequisite of social life). This functional view of morality explains how moral norms emerge in local and contingent ways while nevertheless being genuinely binding for members of their communities. If this view is correct, I argue, then it seems to have implications about the norms adopted by well functioning moralities, which must encourage members to conserve their *doables*, to conform to them, and to interpret one another charitably. I explore these topics in the first sections of the paper.

Next, I argue that a similar approach can be found in classical Confucian texts, which describe a *dao* or guiding way of life that exemplifies many of the features that Velleman takes to be central to moralities in general. The Confucian conception of *li*

* This is the penultimate draft. Please cite the published version: Sarkissian, H. (2022). Well-Functioning Daos and Moral Relativism. *Philosophy East & West*, *72*(1), 230–247.

[1] Note that this characterization of normativity will be inexact. In section II, below, Velleman characterizes normativity in terms of rationality and reasons. Elsewhere it seems clear that normativity also includes (and perhaps reduces to) the drive to sociality. The Confucians say little on the matter directly. For a discussion of the range of ways this term might be deployed in metaethical discussions, see Baker (2017).

(rites / ritual propriety / ritual decorum) is analogous to Velleman's *doables*—a set of social norms and practices meant to enable individuals to converge on shared attitudes and to serve as vehicles for mutual interpretation. And, given their functional conceptions of morality, both Velleman and the Confucians seem unable to distinguish the domain of moral actions from social, religious, or aesthetic actions in any systematic or principled way.

In an Epilogue, I consider how Confucians might respond to the parallels drawn between these approaches. I provide an error theoretic account to explain why the Confucians would (falsely) reject Velleman's relativism, and I leverage the Confucian approach to bring pressure on a claim made by Velleman that it is possible, on his view, to evaluate and rank moralities against the criterion of mutual interpretability.

I – Normativity and the Emergence of Moralities

In *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, David Velleman outlines a version of relativism by accounting for the emergence of moral diversity. The account goes something like this: Human beings have a drive toward sociality, "toward connection with other people, a drive to function as a person among other persons, indeed simply to be a person, insofar as sociality is essential to personhood or personhood is a social status" (54).[2] In order to live in communion and cooperation with one another, humans need "to engage in mutual interpretation… not only interpreting but also being interpretable" (*Ibid*).

As a result of this fundamental drive toward sociality and mutual understanding, communities of humans converge on a shared ontology of *doables*—that is, ways of being ordinary. More accurately, they *invent* or *construct* this ontology as they are driven by the need to get along.

> Before people can be ordinary… there has to be such a thing as ordinariness: there have to be ways that people ordinarily think, feel, and act. That's where *mores* come in. People who need to interact with one another need to converge on ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that will suggest plausible first-pass interpretations of one another in their swiftly developing interactions. Their social *mores* are ways of thinking, feeling, and acting on which they converge. (55)

[2] Throughout this paper, unadorned citations refer to *Foundations for Moral Relativism* 1st edition (2013).

These *mores* will be pervasive, comprising an entire social ontology, and allowing one to express admiration, disapproval, acceptance, hostility, and other mental states. *Mores* can compel, recommend, or permit. Their status within these communities can be stated in familiar categorical expressions such as 'X is wrong' or 'X is obligatory'. When indexed to particular communities, such categorical expressions can guide actions and attitudes. They dictate what is "to be adopted" (52).

However, it is important to note that the drive to sociality does not simply allow individuals to express whatever antecedent values and attitudes they have in a publicly interpretable fashion. Rather, the drive to sociality impels individuals to adopt *shared* values and attitudes; holding shared values and attitudes is *itself* a way—a fundamental way—of being interpretable to one another. Mutual interpretability is, in this sense, "a prerequisite of sociality" (60).[3]

Velleman points out that even though the drive to sociality impels individuals to adopt a social ontology or set of norms, any particular individual can deviate from it: he or she can question existing values and commitments, provide counter-considerations, or suggest exceptions to prevailing rules. But such a person can do so only in part, not in whole, lest they risk becoming uninterpretable (to others if not themselves).

> I cannot emphasize enough that these social necessities allow for exceptions. You can afford to care about things that are generally known to be laughing matters or to overlook things that are generally known to give offense, but you cannot afford to do so in general. By and large… the things you take seriously have to be matters that are generally taken seriously and generally known to be such. (56-57)

Put another way, members can (and will) deviate from their shared ontology—that is, they can (and will) behave in ways that are extraordinary. However, their claims can only have normative force (if any) if they, too, can be interpretable to their communities.

II – *Mores* and Morals

At this point, one might be tempted to ask: how is this an account of the emergence of *morality* and not just, say, *social conventions*? Velleman claims that the philosopher's

[3] There may be a parallel here to Wittgenstein's critique of the possibility of private language in §244-271 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but further exploration would take us away from the central focus of the current paper.

task (the metaethical task, we might say) is to explain the nature of morality; etiquette, manners, or social conventions are simply not a proper part of the explanandum.

> The philosopher asks: Can there be plural moralities of merely local validity? There can of course be local *mores*. *Mores* are always specific to a culture or society or community. But *mores* lack the obligatoriness, or binding force, of morality: one can be justified in ignoring or defying them. Also, *mores* include such trivial matters as the choice of a fork or the height of a hemline. Local moralities, by contrast, would have to make inexorable demands on unavoidable matters, despite being restricted to the members of a particular culture or society or community. Moral relativism must therefore explain how *mores* can have moral force and moral subject matter without being universal. (1)

One might conform to *mores* out of a concern for aesthetics ('it pleases me'), or self-interest ('it will impress others'). Morality, by contrast, "obligates its subjects by being rationally binding on them — more specifically, by generating complete and compelling reasons for them to act, or to hold practical attitudes such as desires or intentions" (49).[4] So how do we separate morals from mere *mores*?

Velleman's answer falls straight out of his account of normativity: The inescapability, bindingness, practical clout, or 'oomph' (Joyce 2007) of morality all derive from the drive one feels to be interpretable to others. That's all there is to normativity. If this is so, then Velleman's account cannot distinguish morality from *mores* in any systematic way, for *mores* derive from the same drive toward sociality and interpretability that morals do.

> One might think: the drive that constitutes the force of reasons should be the drive toward doing what ought to be done and feeling what ought to be felt, not a drive toward some arbitrary aim like mutual interpretability. I say: Mutual interpretability is not an arbitrary aim in relation to the force of reasons. Actions and reactions are interpreted in light of reasons for adopting them. Whatever

[4] The characterization of normativity here (couched in language of rationality and reasons) seems to indicate something stronger than the drive to sociality, below. For while one might concede, as Velleman claims, that the aim of mutual interpretability is not an arbitrary aim, it remains unclear whether that drive alone can provide one with "complete and compelling reasons… to act", even while providing one with some reason. Put another way, if a reason for action is binding on me because I desire to be interpretable, then the strength of that reason—whether it is complete and compelling—seems to hinge on the strength (and not merely the presence) of my drive to mutual interpretability. My thanks to Sandeep Sreekumar for pointing this out.

> force makes one responsive to reasons makes one responsive to the very considerations that figure in interpretation. (59)

Take the notion of 'what ought to be admired', for example. On the one hand people within communities find certain actions or certain individuals genuinely admirable. On the other hand, communities diverge on what is actually admirable. Why?

> The best explanation for these phenomena is that there is no such thing as what categorically ought to be admired; there are only reasons that acquire their weight from some perspective-establishing force, which cannot be the force of what categorically ought to be admired. That force is whatever force gives weight to reasons in general, everywhere. Our practices of justification, and their connection to interpretation, suggest that it is the drive to converge with our community on what to feel, which in turn is best explained by our drive toward mutual interpretability as a prerequisite of sociality. (59-60)

Velleman here adverts to argument by best explanation. His account posits "fundamental, underived norms" that arise from the basic drive to sociality (47). This aims to satisfy the skeptic who thinks that relativism cannot account for normativity in a fundamental way. It can, argues Velleman. But it does so in a way that makes it hard to distinguish a distinct category of the moral. This is because, ultimately, his account does not purport to explain the normativity of *moral* norms as opposed to social ones, but instead to explain all such norms as arising together.[5] Normativity, after all, is not exhausted by the moral. If this is so, morals do indeed seem to collapse to *mores*, or perhaps *mores* rise to the status of morals. Put another way, morals and *mores* may differ in degree but not in kind. Velleman embraces this corollary of his view. "I do not offer a definition of what I mean by 'morality' or 'moralities'… We should not be surprised that relativism rules out the possibility of giving a universal definition of morality" (3).

III – Ubiquitous Features of Well-Functioning Moralities

Before moving on, it will be helpful to note that Velleman's account (as I have laid it out) seems to generate the following prediction: All well-functioning moralities will contain three broad (perhaps meta-) norms, whether implicitly or explicitly. They are:

[5] It's not clear, though, whether (or to what extent) the account is meant to extend to pragmatic or other norms. Presumably there exist forms of normativity apart from the broadly social ones on which Velleman focusses.

1. Conserve the shared ontology
2. Make yourself interpretable
3. Interpret others charitably

Why should we expect these norms to be features of well-functioning moralities? Without (1) mutual interpretability is compromised; the social ontology can (and certainly will) be modified over time, but it cannot change too quickly without compromising mutual interpretability. (This is a familiar intergenerational lament.) So well-functioning moralities will evince a conservative attitude toward their own values, commitments, and practices. ('Expect' here is intended in both the predictive and the normative sense.) Velleman notes (2) and (3) in passing:

> The principles of charity and generosity, for example, are necessarily ubiquitous norms, in the sense that they are operative independently in every normative frame of reference. The fact that these principles are locally operative everywhere is no accident: each normative frame of reference must be established by the drive of its occupants toward sociality, which requires mutual interpretability, which calls for charity on their part as interpreters and generosity on their part as targets of interpretation. (63-64)

In other words, the drive to sociality will impel individuals to want to understand one another, and this drive will make them not only want to be interpretable by others (by making themselves clear) but also to understand others in ways that are ordinary.

Much more can be said about Velleman's account; my presentation of it is necessarily selective. For present purposes, though, it should be enough to motivate what follows.

IV – Parallels with Confucianism and Meta-Confucianism

I will now suggest that there are strong parallels between Velleman's account on the one hand, and early Confucianism and meta-Confucianism on the other. By 'early Confucianism', I mean the particular normative commitments advocated in foundational texts associated with figures such as Kongzi (Confucius) and in texts such as the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) . By 'meta-Confucianism', I mean the ways in which the early Confucians understood the nature of their own normative commitments, and their own insights into the workings of morality.

The purpose of this comparison is two-fold. First, as a long-standing tradition spanning millennia, Confucianism (understood here as a comprehensive culture or way

of life) can lay claim to being well-functioning. It can serve as a test case for examination. Second, as a comparatively underdeveloped research area, Confucian metaethics presents an opportunity to look at familiar metaethical issues from a perspective not beholden to the debates that have characterized Anglo-American philosophy over the past several decades.

V – The Drive to Sociality

In *Analects* 18.6, Kongzi is traveling with a companion when they chance upon two individuals pulling a plough, something normally done by oxen in their time (Slingerland 2003, 216). He dispatches his companion to ask them for directions. Upon returning, this companion informs Kongzi that the ploug-pullers are actually learned men who have left the chaotic world behind to live solitary, secluded lives. Moreover, they mock Kongzi's attempts to stitch the social fabric back together. Kongzi takes this all in and proclaims: "A person cannot flock together with the birds and the beasts. If I do not associate with the followers of men, then with whom would I associate?" (*Analects* 18.6/52/18).[6]

From this perspective, humans cannot live apart without ceasing to be fully human. As Slingerland comments, from the Confucian perspective, "rightful social duties and the elaborations of culture are part of any properly human life, and to abandon these to lead a solitary, primitive lifestyle is to abandon one's humanity" (Slingerland 2003, 217). Becoming a person is the product of cultivation, which begins passively as a child and increasingly becomes one's own responsibility. The expectation is that given the right environment (free of conflict and strife, full of role models and cultural enrichment) a person may come to exemplify *ren* (仁), often translated as 'benevolence' or 'humaneness'—a way of relating to others characterized by warmth, kindness, generosity of spirit, and a sense of shared humanity.

VI – Emergence of a Shared Social Ontology

A hallmark of Confucian writings in this period consists in their wide-ranging reflections on the origins of human cultural institutions, including social divisions and

[6] The numbering of *Analects* sections (Book.Chapter/Page/Line) refers to the ICS concordance edited by D.C. Lau and published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Locations of the textual references can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: http://ctext.org/tools/concordance. Translations are my own, using the text at ctext.org.

roles, music and ceremony, and many other markers of communal existence. While accounts diverge, there are some shared commitments. First, from the Confucian perspective, we are cultural creatures. We adopt our behaviors through inborn inclinations to model our immediate family and the most prestigious members of our society. Second, we are ritualistic creatures. During transformative moments, such as when our caregivers pass away, we use rituals and ceremonies to help us both express and work through our emotions in a way that allows us to cope with them. We came to adopt ritualistic life because it afforded communal harmony and mutual respect.[7] But such rituals extend to many other stable and repeating situation types, including forms of greeting, dining arrangements, sporting events, anniversaries, political debates, etc.

Thus, the analogue of Velleman's *doables* in classical Confucianism are the *li* (禮), commonly translated as rites or ritual propriety. As indicated, the term *li* has a broad semantic range in the classical texts. It refers to formal ceremonial rituals (funerals, weddings, banquets, sacrificial offerings, ancestor worship) on the one end, and basic rules of personal decorum (demeanor, countenance, manners) on the other. What is similar across the range of referents is that the *li* comprise strictures of correct behavior. They were revered as a cultural inheritance constituting the wise practices of ancient sages filtered down and further refined by dynasties of the past.

Confucian texts evince strong aversion at the thought of deviating from this social ontology. Conservatism reigns. In the *Analects*, for example, ritual conservatism is so prevalent that the sole instance where Kongzi accepts a departure from received tradition is noteworthy: he approves an already established change from hemp hats to silk hats (as part of ceremonial garb) because it was driven by broader economic conditions and did not interfere with the ritual's efficacy (Analects 9.3). But this is an existing (and trivial) deviation; he neither proposed or encouraged it. Moreover, he rejects another existing modification in the very same passage—namely, bowing after ascending the temple steps, where traditionally one would bow before. This signals arrogance, thus interfering with the expressive and therefore functional aspect of ritual. In the apt words of Brooks and Brooks, "the 'below' option implies *asking* permission to ascend; the 'above' *presumes* it" (Brooks and Brooks 1998, 51).

From this we can see that ritual conservatism was tied to its general *function*: if the *li* are to have meaning and efficacy they must remain relatively stable across time

[7] Accounts diverge on how much artifice was involved in this process, including deliberate construction versus spontaneous adoption. See Ing (2012) and Sarkissian (forthcoming).

and must express values and commitments in a clear, unambiguous way. Flouting well known customs and norms risks rendering one opaque to those in one's community, thus jeopardizing one's ability to realize a fully human life among them (Wilson 1995). This threatens social coordination and communal well-being, leading to fragmentation. As Fingarette puts it,

> Man has the peculiar power and dignity that he has by virtue of being able to act in intelligently conventional ways rather than out of instinct or conditioning alone… The forms of life, even when viewed in their aspect as intelligent convention, cannot be invented and accepted en bloc; they rest primarily on the inheritance by each age of a vast body of conventional language and practices from the preceding age. Only as we grow up genuinely shaped, through and through, by traditional ways can we be human; only as we reanimate this tradition where new cir-cumstances render it otiose can we preserve integrity and direction in our life. (Fingarette 1972, 69)

VII – Confucian Ethics and the Scope of the Moral

The same issue raised earlier about distinguishing *mores* from morals reappears in discussions of Confucianism. It's easy to see why. The *li* comprise the normative social ontology for the early Confucians—strictures for correct behavior that might seem to constitute something like a moral code. Yet on one interpretation, first advanced by Henry Rosemont, the *Analects* contains neither a distinctive category of morality nor the cluster of concepts that demarcates the moral from the non-moral that appears in some other traditions of thought.

> It is true that one of the meanings of "li" is "morals." The reason "li" is not a good translation of "morals" is because the former term in Chinese has the same connotations and denotations as several distinct English words, all of which are present in "li" on every occasion of its use. The list is familiar…: "rites," "rituals," "customs," "propriety," "manners," "etiquette," etc. Thus, while the morals-meaning is always present in the term "li," it is never present alone. To say, then, that an action is in accordance with li is to say that it is moral, and that it is civil, mannerly, customary, proper, and, in an important sense, religious… Rather than having a theory of moral actions, it can be maintained that Confucius had a moral (aesthetic, religious) theory of all human actions… (Rosemont 1976, 465–466)

While these comments are made with the *Analects* in mind, they can be generalized to other texts that take the *li* to be central.

Having put forward this interpretation of the *li*, Rosemont goes on to raise a possible worry one might have with it—namely, that it seems to attribute to Kongzi "a philosophical naivete of the first magnitude". Why? "Virtually every contemporary philosopher would be aghast at Confucius [Kongzi] being unwilling—or worse, unable—to distinguish clearly moral actions like telling lies from clearly social actions like slurping soup." Without such basic distinctions, "how could any analysis or evaluation of moral issues occur?" (ibid, 466). However, Rosemont goes on to question whether there is any non question begging way of demarcating the moral, or whether there is any non question begging way of limiting the importance of the 'merely' social.[8]

> How do we know that "clearly social" actions do not have significant moral consequences? The fact that slurping soup is not a signal of moral activity in Western philosophy may tell us more about Western philosophy than it does about moral actions. It is surely possible for me to slurp my soup so loudly, intentionally or not, that my dinner companions lose their appetites, and in all such cases the line between boorish and immoral behavior becomes harder to draw. The point is obvious: breaches of accepted manners, ceremonies, and customs can cause severe discomfort to others. (ibid, 467)

We find here, then, a parallel issue as in section II, above. Again, one must reckon seriously with the notion that morals deflate to *mores*, or that *mores* inflate to morals.[9]

---

[8] For a detailed chronicle of the mid 20th century attempt by many philosophers to generate a satisfactory definition of morality, including the failure and eventual abandonment of this project, see Stich (2018). For a recent argument that the category of 'morality' is a historical and contingent fact, see Machery (2018). For more general discussion of whether or not there is a distinct category of the moral in early Confucianism, and the problems locating concepts in it that seem to have no lexical equivalent, see the introductory chapters of Van Norden (2007) and Cline (2013).

[9] The closest we come to something demarcating the a normative consideration *in contrast* to the *li* is the notion of *yi* (義), which refers to a sense of what is right or appropriate to do when there is no obvious ritual that would govern the particular interaction or situation at hand. However, this sense of what is right or appropriate seems itself to require a sensitivity to what would be in the spirit of ritual propriety. For discussion, see Sarkissian (2014).

IX – Make Yourself Interpretable; Interpret Others Charitably

The cohesion and cooperativeness of a society hinge on many factors, including the character of the innumerable interactions of its individual members, during which goodwill, empathy, and mutual trust can be fostered moment by moment. The daily interactions of social life involve potential conflicts of interest, asymmetries in power or prestige, competition over goods hard to come by, and numerous other factors that become inflection points that risk driving people apart. Think of dealing with a boss or junior colleague, or discussing the well-being of a friend's troubled child, or arriving at a queue simultaneously with a stranger. In such microethical situations (Morton 2002) rituals and shared norms of decorum help us clarify our meaning to one another, foregoing misunderstandings and preventing confusion or friction from gaining traction.

How does one know which rituals are apt? In earlier papers, I have argued that two broad norms drive most of early Confucian ethical practice, both of which concern interpretation in Velleman's sense of the term. They demand one be mindful of how one is interpreted by others, and that one interpret others charitably. We can think of these as self-awareness on the one hand, and discernment on the other.

Self-awareness. While in the company of others, one is continually influencing them in ways both manifest and subtle, whether one intends to or not (e.g. through one's appearance, speech, tone of voice, demeanor, posture, odors, etc.). Being self-aware, then, means understanding oneself through the other's perspective in order to make one's intentions, goals, values, and attitudes to the other transparent (Sarkissian 2010b, 2017). This is *objective* self-awareness—that is, seeing oneself through the other's eyes, appreciating how one might be affecting them, and using this perspective to fine tune one's behavior.

Discernment. Of course, this requires a keen and sympathetic understanding of the other's point of view, such as their moods, intentions, or feelings, as well as the particular roles they are currently inhabiting or other constraints on their behavior—such as their backgrounds and worldviews. It is an ability to empathize and read minds (Sarkissian 2010a) and to make inferences from contextual cues (Sarkissian 2017). Finally, when friction arises, it requires giving others the benefit of a doubt (if only for a time) so as to allow for the possibility

> of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and other barriers toward understanding (Sarkissian 2015).

It would be a mistake, then, to think that the predominance of the *li* in Confucian ethics stems from a fetishization of high culture, or a conservatism toward certain aesthetic forms. Instead, functional considerations are foremost in mind. Abiding by the *li* signals to others that they are within the scope of our moral concern, that they merit consideration and respect, that they are the focus of our attention. Observing the rites in everyday exchanges can be considered a "formal enactment of respect for the community, its tradition, and its members," whereby we "forestall conflict, misunderstanding, disorientation, and surprise, protecting ourselves and each other from shame and insult" (Haines 2008, 478). Rituals thus function to express one's values, intentions, desires, and motives in predictable, discernable ways.

X – Harmony and Well-Functioning *Dao*s

The *li* comprise an entire social ontology. When practiced, they have the power to shape and coordinate life in harmonious ways, as put succinctly in the following passage:

> Master You said, "When it comes to the function of ritual, harmonization [*he* 和] is of value. It is precisely such harmonization that makes the *dao* of the Former Kings so beautiful; great and small alike practiced it. However, there is something that doesn't work; understanding harmony, but trying to achieve it without regulation by the rites—indeed, that will not work." *Analects* 1.12/2/6-7

Why is regulation by the rights necessary to realize harmony? According to David Wong, "one reason why harmony cannot be sought for its own sake is that aiming directly at harmony lacks the power of summoning forth attitudes that may be shaped into mutual respect between the participants" (Wong 2000, 209).[10] These attitudes can best be instilled through shared practices; the *li* constitute such shared practices.

Here we see how the *li* go beyond allowing for mutual interpretation to fostering the coherence and continuity of the community. Human communities contain diverse perspectives, drives, interests, and personalities. Achieving harmony requires

[10] As my colleague Sandeep Sreekumar points out, Mill says something similar about happiness: aim directly at it and you will fail to have an aptitude for it. He asks whether the core directing values of any ethical system are all self-effacing in this way and need to be approached by circuitous indirection. I don't know.

acknowledging such diversity—even fostering it. Homogenization or domination of one perspective over others is explicitly contrasted with harmony. “The Master said: The nobleman harmonizes and does not seek mere conformity; the petty person seeks conformity and does not harmonize” (*Analects* 13.24/36/11). Understood this way, harmonization is a continual process whereby divergent and even discordant perspectives and values are allowed expression and possible accommodation, even while acknowledging disagreement and the inevitability of conflict (see Li 2006; 2018; Wong 2020). This, of course, is something that doesn't simply happen; it requires effort as well as attitudes of trust and goodwill, of community and shared purpose, which cannot be brought forward at whim. Instead, such attitudes must be cultivated. Rituals “foster a common bond between the living participants, a sense of community that is rooted in the past and stretches onward into the future” (Wong 2000, 209).

Ideally, harmony will not be a mere absence of conflict, or the product of impositions and involuntary constraints (Li 2018). Instead, individual perspectives should contribute to the whole, and be incorporated so as to enrich the community. When this is not possible, members of communities can still have shared projects and values, and harmony can take the character of sustaining these in spite of differences and disagreements that cannot be resolved, and which must instead be accommodated, set aside, or even ignored. The *li* help to remind people of their shared values and identities, which makes the sustaining of the community possible under such circumstances.

In sum, then, we can note some broad similarities between the two metaethical perspectives outlined. Both see normativity as leading to shared practices aimed at coordination of human activity. Both acknowledge the role that such norms and practices play in mutual understanding and bringing coherence to a diversity of perspectives. Both think that fostering shared attitudes and values is a primary way that individuals can come to mutual understanding. Notwithstanding, some important differences emerge, which call out for further discussion…

Epilogue

Velleman: If Sarkissian is right, it seems we may be walking the same path.

Kongzi: Ha! Nice choice of words.[11] Yes, our *daos* have similarities. There's just a couple of questions to work through.

Velleman: Oh? What might those be?

Kongzi: Well, to start, we are not relativists.

Velleman: Right. Well, that's completely understandable given your historical context. There was nothing from your point of view to compete with the high culture of the Zhou dynasty. So, from where you stood, it would seem unlikely that there could be any *dao* equally rich or efficacious.[12] But even in your own time there were competing ways of organizing human communities, hence competing *daos*.

Kongzi: *Dao*s are plural, yes. But the Zhou could look back on the dynasties preceding it, refining and perfecting their *dao* (*Analects* 3.14).

Velleman: I'm in no position to deny that. But to maintain that *daos* are plural, that the function of *daos* is to guide and coordinate human activity, and *also* maintain that there is but a single, uniquely correct *dao* for all peoples at all times, seems plausible only in the absence of daos comparable to the Zhou.

Kongzi: Zhou culture is a unique achievement.

Velleman: In one sense it is. In another it's not. It's unique in terms of its content. But it's not in terms of its function. Zhou culture consists of a set of interlocking rites, norms, and practices that coordinates human affect and activity and fosters cohesion. Communities have flourished throughout history that differ in thoroughgoing ways from the Zhou. I suggest that we should be open to learning from *dao*s different than our own. *Daos* are collective experiments (69).

Kongzi: Well, it's true that the *li* changed over time… (*Analects* 3.14, 15.11)

Velleman: Yes, and more to the point: didn't you say in *Analects* 15.29 that humans enlarge *dao*s, and not the other way around?

Kongzi: Yes. What are you getting at?

---

[11] One common meaning of *dao* is 'road' or 'path'.

[12] A similar point is made by Fingarette (1972 ch.4).

Velleman: Just that, as communities of individuals—whether here or there, whether now or then—struggle to get along, they must, of necessity, change their shared practices (their *li*) to meet changing circumstances. Different communities will do this in their own way based on their own circumstances. "Reason-guided change is path-dependent: where it ends up depends on where it began. So different communities may have reason to change in ways that still lead to different ways of life" (68).

Kongzi: Okay, but *dao*s are not arbitrary.

Velleman: Right. Their starting points are. Nonetheless, they are all responsive to features of human nature, broadly construed (64-65). So the range of viable *daos* is constrained.[13]

Kongzi: Yes, the *li* are responsive to, and exist to shape and channel human affect. But some *li* do this more efficaciously than others. That there could be not only different *dao*s but better and worse ones too—can you not acknowledge this?

Velleman: Yes. In fact I do.

Kongzi: You do?

Velleman hands Kongzi a copy of 'Foundations of Moral Relativism' opened at page 68, and points to the following passage: "Communities do not qualify as more or less advanced by falling closer or further from some universal or ubiquitous morality. There is no universal or even ubiquitous morality, and there are no universal norms of any kind. What there are, however, are ubiquitous norms of interpretation and interpretability, which are the fundamental prerequisites of sociality, and it is in relation to these norms that communities can be more or less advanced. They can be more or less advanced, in other words, in terms of the prerequisites of sociality…".[14]

Kongzi takes a sip of tea and continues reading.

Kongzi: Hmmm… Don't you mean, "Yes, *but*…"? On the next page, you claim that "We cannot eyeball various communities and see how well

[13] For more on such functional criteria for moralities, see Wong (2006).

their ways of life facilitate mutual intelligibility," that any differences "are usually too subtle to discern from an academic perspective, least of all from the philosopher's study" (69).

Velleman: Right. We can't make these comparisons because doing so is difficult, not because we lack a reasonable way of doing so.

Kongzi: Should it be so difficult? Rituals, or *doables*, exist so as to make communal living possible, to allow individuals to understand one another, to foster not only shared values and expectations but also shared means of resolving or simply managing disagreement, thereby allowing them to continue to live together in spite of such disagreement. This is the process of harmonization. So, more harmonious communities—those that coordinate and allow optimal expression of unavoidable (and even desirable) diversity among its members, and thereby allow them to persist through time—are better functioning ones.

Velleman: Okay, but my criterion is mutual interpretability, not harmony. Moralities can be better or worse in terms of fostering the former, not the latter.

Kongzi: People need to make sense of one another because, as you say, people have a drive to sociality.

Velleman: Yes, that's right.

Kongzi: A drive to sociality, is, in your words a drive "toward connection with other people, a drive to function as a person among other persons, indeed simply to be a person, insofar as sociality is essential to personhood or personhood is a social status" (54). Doesn't this mean that successful *daos* are ones that allow individuals to sustain sociality in spite of inevitable disagreement? This is what it means to harmonize.

Velleman: Harmony is, of course, a core value of many cultures, some of which I discuss in my book. But individuals can arrive at very different value preferences whereby they favor, say, greater self-expression or individualism.

Kongzi: Of course they can. People can choose to be hermits, too. I've met some (*Analects* 15.6). I do not deny that *daos* can be multiple or very

different from one another, or that they can fragment and fall apart. But the more they do, and the less people feel impelled to maintain their shared rites and practices, the less successful their *daos*. At any rate, we started down this track because you maintain that we can compare moral communities, that we can rank them in terms of their ability to afford mutual interpretation. But a community isn't a community without some shared sense of belonging and purpose, and a desire to perpetuate it. Communities with fewer shared practices and norms suggests a loss of normativity, and the very driving force that impels individuals to live together withers. You write: "Where this force is absent, there are no reasons for acting or reacting, and no actions or attitudes are to be adopted: everything is normatively weightless" (63-64). So moralities dissipate in the absence of well-functioning rites that can sustain the community in the face of real and persistent disagreement. People can, of course, exist together in the same space, but without this normative force they don't seem to constitute the paradigmatic moral communities you describe in the book, or the various cultures studied by the anthropologists you cite. So I'm left wondering how it's possible to do the sort of comparative evaluation of moralities that you suggest without going beyond mutual interpretability, and taking both sociality and this notion of harmonizing more seriously.

Velleman: So what you're saying is that I can't have my red bean bun and eat it, too?

Kongzi: Ha! Something like that. On your view, moralities consist of the shared ontologies that emerge out of the drive to sociality. If individuals don't feel impelled to converge on one, if individuals cannot harmonize with one another and instead feel alienated, living fragmented lives, then this signals a lesser functioning morality—one that individuals might justifiably abandon

Velleman: Hmm… There's more to say, but this dialogue is dragging on, and I think we've had enough words put in our mouths. How about a drink?

Kongzi: Sure! Or even a few.[14] I'm buying.[15]

References

Baker, Derek Clayton. 2017. "The Varieties of Normativity." In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, edited by Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett, 567–81. London: Routledge.

Brooks, E. Bruce, and A. Taeko Brooks. 1998. *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cline, Erin. 2013. *Confucius, Rawls, and the Sense of Justice*. Fordham Univ Press.

Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. Waveland Press.

Flanagan, Owen, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong. 2008a. "Naturalizing Ethics." In *Moral Psychology Volume 1, The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, edited by Walter Sinnott Armstrong, 1–26. 2008: MIT Press.

———. 2008b. "What Is the Nature of Morality? A Response to Casebeer, Railton and Ruse." In *Moral Psychology Volume 1, The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 45–52. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Haines, William A. 2008. "The Purloined Philosopher: Youzi on Learning by Virtue." *Philosophy East & West* 58 (4): 470–91.

Ing, Michael David Kaulana. 2012. *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Li, Chenyang. 2006. "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony." *Philosophy East & West* 56 (4): 583–603.

———. 2018. "Community without Harmony?" In *Encountering China: Michael Sandel and Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Michael J. Sandel and Paul J. D'Ambrosio, 3. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Machery, Edouard. 2018. "Morality: A Historical Invention." In *The Atlas of Moral*

[14] *Analects* 10.8/24/17: "With wine alone he set non strict limits, though he never drank to the point of messiness."

[15] My thanks to Myeongseok Kim, Sai Ying Ng, Sandeep Sreekumar, David Velleman, and David Wong for comments on earlier drafts, and to audiences at Rutgers University, Fudan University, Sogang University, and the Korean Society for Analytic Philosophy for helpful discussion. Needless to say, any remaining errors or infelicities are my own.

Psychology, edited by Kurt Gray and Jesse Graham, 259–65. New York: Guilford Press.

Morton, Adam. 2002. *The Importance of Being Understood: Folk Psychology as Ethics*. London: Routledge.

Rosemont, Henry. 1976. "Review - Confucius The Secular as Sacred." *Philosophy East & West* 26 (4): 463–77.

Sarkissian, Hagop. forthcoming. "Confucianism and Ritual." In *Oxford Handbook of Confucianism*, edited by Jennifer Oldstone-Moore. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2010a. "Confucius and the Effortless Life of Virtue." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27 (1): 1–16.

———. 2010b. "Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy." *Philosopher's Imprint* 10 (9): 1–15.

———. 2014. "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*." In *Dao Companion to the Analects*, edited by Amy Olberding, 95–116. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

———. 2015. "When You Think It's Bad, It's Worse than You Think: Psychological Bias and the Ethics of Negative Character Assessments." In *The Philosophical Challenge from China*, edited by Brian Bruya, 3–22. Cambridge: MIT Press.

———. 2017. "Situationism, Manipulation, and Objective Self-Awareness." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (3): 489–503.

Slingerland, E. G. 2003. *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Hackett Publishing.

Stich, Stephen. 2018. "The Quest for the Boundaries of Morality." In *The Routledge Handbook of Moral Epistemology*, edited by Aaron Zimmerman, Karen Jones, and Mark Timmons. New York: Routledge.

Van Norden, Bryan W. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Velleman, J. David. 2013. *Foundations for Moral Relativism*. Open Book Publishers.

Wilson, Stephen. 1995. "Conformity, Individuality, and the Nature of Virtue: A Classical Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Reflection." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (2): 263–89.

Wong, David B. 2000. "Fragmentation in Civil Society and the Good." In *Civility*, edited by Leo S. Rouner, 200–221. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

———. 2006. *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*. New York: Oxford

University Press.
———. 2020. “Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6 (2): 139–55.