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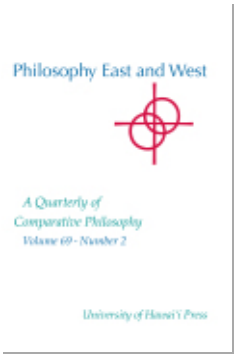

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AGENT AND DEED IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to develop a picture of human agency grounded on ideas found in "early Confucian" thought. In particular, I want to sketch a broadly Confucian picture of the relationship between *agent* and *action*—that is, between the *subject* or *self* or *person* on the one hand and its *deeds* or *activities* or *practical manifestations* on the other. To do this, I shall draw on key passages in the *Analects* of Confucius, and, moreover, build on recognizably Confucian ideas that contemporary scholars of Chinese thought have extracted through careful textual and historical analysis of Confucian writings. Although I take my inspiration from important Confucian texts and interpreters, it should be stressed that my primary interest is not in settling exegetical debates (though I shall have something to say about those as well), but in what we may learn philosophically from Confucian interpretations of human agency.

In speaking of "early Confucian," I mean to refer to the classical philosophical thought of the pre-Qin or Warring States era. This is the historical period demarcated roughly as the time between the death of Confucius in 479 B.C. to the founding of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C. Recent critical engagement with the writings of the early Confucian thinkers has led many scholars to the view that the term "Confucian" is best taken to represent a range of philosophical views. It has become increasingly clear that there is no *one* Confucian moral philosophy, no *one* Confucian political theory, no *one* Confucian view of the self, no *one* Confucian view of human action, and so on. Still, even if there is sufficient complexity and tension in competing characterizations of Confucian thought to resist the assumption of a singular and unified "Confucian" position on these and other topics, the account of human agency I shall develop can be characterized as Confucian, insofar as it is inspired by the work of *some* early Confucian thinkers and strands of thought. I believe the picture of agency put forward is worthy in its own right of our philosophical attention, apart from exegetical questions.

My discussion is structured as follows. In section 1, I outline two influential accounts of the early Confucian conception of agency put forth by contemporary commentators. In section 2, I identify the strengths and limitations of the competing accounts. In section 3, I propose an alternative way of

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understanding the conception of action held by (some) early Confucians: an intermediate view that accommodates the strengths and insights of the two accounts and avoids their limitations. In section 4, I turn to several key passages in the *Analects* for the purposes of both clarifying the intermediate view I propose and adding further textual support for my interpretation. In section 5, I elaborate the account by relating it to philosophical understandings of weakness of will and self-deception. I also register some additional points about the content of moral regret in early Confucian moral psychology.

I. Two Accounts of Agency in Confucian Thought

Contemporary commentators on the Confucian tradition tend to adopt either one of two competing characterizations of the early Confucian conception of human agency.[1] The first characterization embodies the assumption of a deep and fundamental difference between the way in which the early Confucians on the one hand and Western philosophers (particularly those shaped by broadly Christian, Cartesian, and Kantian presuppositions) on the other conceive of the relationship between agent and action. Herbert Fingarette is representative, arguing that Confucius did not have the concepts of "choice," "choosing," "deciding," or "inner life."[2] Fingarette claims that, in contrast to Western thinkers, Confucius omits "the whole complex of notions centering around 'choice' and 'responsibility'." Though he puts the point a bit less strongly, Joel Kupperman likewise claims that "Confucius thinks that people make what we would term choices, but they are not or should not be 'real' choices."[3] In a similar vein, Henry Rosemont holds that classical Chinese thinkers did not have concepts of (or words for) "action," "rational agent," or "choice." He asserts that the classical Chinese language in which the early Confucians wrote their philosophical views "not only contains no lexical item for moral; it also has no terms corresponding to freedom, liberty, autonomy, individual utility, principles, rationality, rational agent, action, objective, subject, choice, dilemma, duty, or rights."[4] For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on the claim that the early Confucians did not have the notions of agent, action, and choice, setting to the side the other ideas on Rosemont's list.

These commentators—Fingarette, Kupperman, and Rosemont—either explicitly claim or tacitly invite the thought that the early Confucians did not think in terms of such notions as agent, choice, decision, and action. Their interpretations would seem to imply that the early Confucians drew no distinction between human actions on the one hand and mere natural events (such as leaves falling from a tree) or mere bodily movements (such as the hand twitching) on the other. Indeed, as Chad Hansen puts it: "Classical Chinese thinkers made no distinction between human actions and the natural course of events, nor did they have the distinction between 'agent causation' and 'event causation.'"[5]

Against this picture of the early Confucians, other commentators insist that the early Confucians *did* have such concepts as agent and action, and, moreover, had conceptions of agency that resemble Western conceptions of agency in significant respects. The clearest representative of this interpretation is that of David Nivison, who asserts that some of the early Confucians had the concept of "action," and that Mencius, in particular, had a theoretical account of action in terms of "an inner mental act of thought," "an act of mind-heart."[6] Nivison writes:

> Confucius, Mozi, and Mencius are in one way all heading in the same direction. All seem to assume that various sorts of things one could do—pursue the Way, practice universal love, govern benevolently—require appropriate dispositions, and that *one can simply choose* to use (effectively have) these dispositions or not. So, if we think of these dispositions as part of ourselves, we must think of there being in the self, so to speak, *a sort of control tower that can activate them, perhaps as one might flip a switch—a core of the self that is radically free to choose.*[7] (my italics)

In this passage, Nivison attributes to the early Confucians something akin to the notion of a subject's will or intention residing behind our behavior and bodily movements, a will or intention that brings them about. His characterization suggests that, insofar as the early Confucians thought in such terms as "an act of heart-mind," "inner mental act of thought," and "the self as control tower," they possessed something like the idea of an inner psychological entity: some mental state or occurrence or particular that is *separate* from the action and guides it. In this interpretation, human actions, activities, practices, and other forms of practical comportment (such as pursing the Way, practicing universal love, and governing benevolently) are explained by reference to an inner, separate self or locus of agency—the prior cause of the outward practical manifestations.

Benjamin Schwartz echoes this idea:

> [T]he view which Fingerette harshly attacks—namely that Confucius is vitally concerned with qualities, capacities, and inner mental dispositions which we associate not simply with concrete acts but with living persons as persons—is a correct view, and . . . Confucius' emphasis on these inner qualities is one of his true innovations. Further, I contend that even the metaphor of the "inner" as a way of referring to these realities is by no means alien to Chinese thought in general or even to Confucius in particular.[8]

Schwartz, too, is committed to the notion that the early Confucians possessed something like the idea of inner mental states or occurrences or particulars, which reside behind human activity. It is worth pausing to consider exactly what Schwartz and Nivison mean by "inner." The notion of "inner" connotes something that is to be distinguished from the "outer"—or outward behavior. If we take outward behavior to be directly observable, the contrast with the inner implies that what is inner is (typically) not directly observable. While we are

able to observe the actions of others directly, this is not so with respect to their intentions, motives, and other mental states.

For Nivison, Schwartz, and others, then, the early Confucians not only possessed the notions approximating those of subject and action, they also tied the subject to a separable, inner causal center of agency, involving discrete intention-like mental states.[9] In their view, the early Confucian conception of action was not all that radically different from Western conceptions of action, with special affinities to the views of such historical figures as St. Anselm, Descartes, and Kant, and contemporary philosophers like Davidson and Searle.[10]

II. Actions and Events

In light of the interpretative divide outlined in the previous section, I want to propose something of an "intermediate" picture of the relationship between agent and action. In particular, I want to develop a Confucian conception that satisfies the following three desiderata. The account must:

1. be capable of distinguishing between actions and events, but
2. do without the idea of a separate, inner subject or psychological state (as exemplified by Nivison's notion of "an act of heart-mind"), and
3. be recognizably Confucian, insofar as it is supported by key Confucian texts.

Let me elaborate. I want to contend—against Fingarette, Rosemont, Kupperman, and Hansen (or at least certain *strong* readings of their claims)—that the early Confucians did have the concept of action, insofar as they did *not* hold that no events are actions, that we never really do anything. Putting the point in slightly different terms, I believe we should find a way to understand the insights of Fingarette, Rosemont, and others without taking on board the implausible notion that the early Confucians did not (or could not) distinguish between human actions and mere natural events. After all, if the Confucians were not able to distinguish between human actions and mere natural events, this means that on the one hand they would have been unable to distinguish between actions—such as properly offering food and drink to one's ancestors in a ritual ceremony—and on the other mere natural events—such as wood rotting or water dripping. This seems to me to be a philosophically unsatisfying view, and therefore an undesirable exegesis of Confucian texts, particularly when phrases that appear repeatedly in the *Analects*, such as "cultivate oneself," are naturally taken to suggest the exercise of one's agency.[11] For this reason, then, we should be reluctant to take on the assumption that the early Confucians did not see some events as actions.

In other words, it is implausible to suppose that the early Confucians were incapable of regarding themselves as the source of their decisions and actions, to suppose that they did not think of themselves as having the

capacity to intend, to decide to do something, to act—and indeed, to take and receive responsibility in some sense. So I believe we can and should attribute to the early Confucians an understanding of human action (as distinct from mere natural events), an understanding that fits with the idea that human beings behave on the basis of deliberation, reasons, desires, beliefs, and purposes.[12] And we can attribute this to the early Confucians, while still stopping short of attributing to them many distinctively modern Western philosophical notions, such as:

1. the Cartesian dualistic distinction between soul and body,
2. the recognition of the "mind" as the unitary locus of action, practical and theoretical thought, and consciousness,
3. the idea of the "will" as a mental action mediating between decision and doing something, and
4. the Kantian idea of the moral self that is virtually characterless, but is simply the perspective of reason or morality.

If we are to understand the early Confucians as being capable of distinguishing actions from mere bodily movements and natural events, then we need to reject the assumption that the Confucians did not have notions approximating those of "subject," "self," or "agent." For what distinguishes human actions from naturally occurring events is that actions are things done *intentionally* or *purposively* or *deliberately*: that is, with some aim or goal. But the idea of doing something intentionally or on purpose implies that that there *is* some subject's understanding or view of or "take" on what is happening and why, some "take" without which we would not be able to pick out the class of events that are actions.[13] This subject's view or perspective need not, of course, take the form of explicit reflection or deliberation; it can be, and often is, unreflective and habitual. But all the same, the crucial point is that there must be some such subject's perspective or "take" in order for there to be intentional action. And if there is a subject's perspective, then there must also be some subject—some self or agent or doer—as well.

In light of these considerations, we should resist the view, which Fingarette and Rosement have defended, that the Confucians did not take there to be subjects and actions. For to do so would be to attribute to the early Confucians a view that it would be difficult to take seriously both as an interpretation of Confucian thought and as a view with philosophical plausibility in its own right. And yet, it is important to acknowledge that Fingarette, Rosemont, and others are on to *something*, in trying to articulate a conception of agency and action in early Confucians texts that radically stands apart from a conception that is virtually second nature to many Western thinkers—in particular those who have been shaped by the Christian, Cartesian, Kantian tradition. I suggest that the radical claims of Fingarette and Rosemont are best understood in terms of what Charles Taylor calls the adoption of a "language of perspicuous contrast." Such a language, according to Taylor, facilitates our ability to think

through the claims of different cultural perspectives: framing things in terms that stress the differences between these cultures rather than attempting to gloss over them.[14]

Moreover, given that the content and emphasis of Confucian ethics is different in non-trivial respects from that of Western ethics, it is reasonable to expect to find non-trivial differences between the Confucian moral psychology and Western moral psychology. Robert Pippin writes:

> views of the soul and its capacities vary with beliefs about and commitments to norms; normative commitments are subject to radical historical change; and so what counts as soul or psyche or mind and thus psychology also changes. The "soul" is merely the name for a collective historical achievement, a mode of self-understanding, of one sort or another, what we have made ourselves into at one point or another in the service of some ideal or other.[15]

One does not, of course, have to hold the radical claim that conceptions of the "soul"—or understandings of the self—are *merely* in the service of values and ideals in order to agree with the less radical claim that conceptions of the soul or self are very likely to be different when values and ideals are different.

With these considerations in the background, then, I propose that we see Fingarette, Rosemont, and others as engaged in the project of outlining the contours of a moral psychology radically different from one that is either based on or historically developed out of a commitment to the notion of an immaterial soul. That is to say, what they seek is a picture that does without the idea—as Robert Pippin puts it in a different context—of "an ontologically distinct subject as agent, separable from, supervising, willing into existence, and individually responsible for her particular actions."[16]

This assumption—the assumption of *a subject independent of and behind its deeds*—has been a part of the dominant picture of moral psychology in Western philosophical thought. It has been an assumption of the dominant picture, whether this independent subject is conceived of as an immaterial soul *or* as a material substance (such as the brain or brain states or bodily states). I want to explore the possibility that the early Confucians had a conception of human agency that does without the assumption of an *independent subject*, construed in either material or immaterial terms.

I also deny that the Confucians held anything like the "causal-intentional theory of action"[17] of the sort that Nivison and others tacitly adopt in their reading of certain early Confucian texts. This is precisely the picture that Fingerette, Rosemont, and others are reacting against as an interpretation of the early Confucians. On the *causal-intentional* conception, there must be some non-directly observable subject's intention, some inner mental particular like belief or desire or will ("an inner mental act of thought"[18]), residing behind the bodily movement, and causing it.[19] I suspect that it is because commentators like Nivison and Schwartz rightly appreciate that

some notion of a subject (or a subject's "take") is needed to be able to distinguish between actions, on the one hand, and mere bodily movement and natural events, on the other, that they were then led to misconstrue the early Confucian conception of action in inner, causal-intentionalist terms. But we needn't attribute to the early Confucians the idea of the will as a mental action mediating between decision and doing something, in order to attribute to them some notion of a subject. Nevertheless, the point to emphasize is that Nivison and Schwartz are correct in recognizing that the early Confucians did not think there were merely subject-less "*ren*-events" and "*li*-events." They are right to insist that the early Confucians conceived of actions as being *performed by subjects* that display *ren* and actions performed by subjects that observe *li*.

If this is right, then we do need to appeal to some intention *from* or *on* which the person acts, something that could be expressed as his reason for doing what he does.[20] For example, when the *junzi*, the exemplary person, participates in sacrificial rites, there must be something the *junzi* sees as counting in favor of doing so—some *reason* the *junzi* could offer after the fact to illuminate why he ended up doing what he did rather than other possibilities. It seems we must be able to appeal to such a subject's intention in this minimal sense of a subject's deciding or willing or committing to act *for some purpose or end* to be able to distinguish between event types such as serving one's parents by giving them a lavish funeral from event types such as metal rusting or leaves falling to the ground or water dripping. The presupposition that there is some subject's *intention* (however misleading this nominalization may be) is therefore needed to distinguish actions from mere bodily movements and events in the natural world—to account for the difference, as Wittgenstein famously put it, between *my raising my arm* and *my arm going up*.[21]

Thus, I agree with Nivison, Schwartz, and others, insofar as I think we should be reluctant to deny that the early Confucians had concepts approximating those of "action," "choice," "subject," and "self," concepts the possession of which seems to be presupposed by the very capacity to distinguish between human actions and mere natural events. However, I part ways with Nivison, Schwartz, and others, in that I do not think we need to understand the acting subject in terms of mental particulars or occurrences: determinate mental entities, non-directly observably residing behind the bodily movement.[22] In other words, we needn't attribute to the early Confucians the notion of a *non-directly observable subject's will or intention residing behind the bodily movement as cause of the action* in order to hold that they were able to distinguish certain events as actions, as things done by someone.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the early Confucians did not have a conception of inner mental states, although there have been commentators who have defended this line.[23] I do not deny that the early Confucians had

something like the notion of inner mental states. Indeed, my own view is that the early Confucians did, insofar as they certainly would have acknowledged the existence of private thoughts, feelings, and sensations. My point is that the notion of inner mental states *as practical cause* is not essential to the early Confucian picture of action. In short, the early Confucian conception of agency did not involve the notion of inner mental states. This, I argue, is the core idea motivating Fingarette, Rosemont, and Kupperman's denial that the early Confucians had notions of agent, choice, decision, and action. But their language in conveying the subtle point is overly strong, and therefore misleading.

In sum, the interpretative challenge is to resolve the tension between the two main approaches to the early Confucian conception of the subject-deed relation in a way that is sensitive to the central insights motivating them, but that also avoids taking on board two ideas:

1. that for the early Confucians, no events are actions (that is, we never do anything), and
2. that the early Confucians subscribed to a notion of a separable, inner subject or causal center of agency, with discrete mental states.

III. An Intermediate View: Agency as Actualization

I shall now sketch a view of the early Confucian conception of agency that avoids taking on board the two ideas stated above. What I propose is that, insofar as the early Confucians distinguished between human actions and mere natural events, they possessed the notions of subject and action. But, crucially, they conceived of the subject (or subject's intention) not as separate from the action, but as *in* the action. So the early Confucians did have something like the notion of a subject (or self, or doer) and also the concept of action (or deed)—thus, the view I propose avoids (1) above. But they did not conceive of the relation between subject and deed as a causal one: they did not think in terms of a separate, inner subject behind and before the action, serving as its cause—thus, the view I propose avoids (2).

For the early Confucians, actions are *expressions or manifestations of the self* rather than caused results of the self. They are not causes conceived of either as psychological states like beliefs and desires, or as the subject himself by an *act of will.*[24] Consider Nivison's "*act* of heart-mind," which suggests something like spontaneous resolve or decision or could-have-done-otherwise cause. The idea of *an act of heart-mind* is very similar to the idea of an act of will by the self. In the picture that I am attributing to (some) early Confucians, the subject or the subject's intention is seen as being *in* the deed: *expressed in* or *translated into* the action. So the relation between subject and deed is one of *actualization* or *expression* or

manifestation rather than causation. The self is actualized, realized through action rather than causing action.

To be clear, my claim is not that some early Confucians denied the existence of a self or will. Rather, my claim is that for some early Confucians the self is not conceived as being separate, behind, distinct from the activity itself. *The will is not separate from what one wills.* The claim does not deny that the subject *expresses* itself in what it wills—in activity. Indeed, the clan affirms just that—that there is such an expression.

Let me register the similarity between the interpretation I am offering and the view implicit in Nietzsche's remarks about the subject-deed relation in a famous passage in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

> And just as the common people separate lightning from its flash, and take the latter to be a deed, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestation of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the freedom to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; the "doer" is invented as an afterthought,—the deed is everything.[25]

As commentators have pointed out, in this passage Nietzsche is not making the "uninviting claim" that "we never really do anything, that no events are actions,"[26] or that "there are only bodily movements, that there is no difference between my raising my arm and my arm going up."[27] To deny the existence of a doer or self is one thing; to deny that there is a doer or self that is *separable* from the deed or action is another. It is the latter idea, I am arguing, that is held by some early Confucians and Nietzsche. On this view of the subject-deed relation, the subject (the subject's intention or will) is *in* the action: the subject comes to be realized and revealed in the doing.[28]

In the next section, I will propose that a crucial implication of the view I am developing and attributing to (some) early Confucians is that a subject can avow all sorts of intentions prior to the time of action, but what intention he actually formed (what he is in fact willing to do, how committed or resolved he actually is to doing it) is not settled until after he has acted. Only after the time of action, then, is it determined whether in fact the person was or was not committed (or committed to some specified degree) to the action as he would have insisted before acting.

IV. Textual Support and Clarification

To clarify my Confucian-inspired conception of agency, I want to draw on several passages in the *Analects* that share a common theme: the prioritizing of deed over word, of action over speech.

Consider, first, *Analects* 2.13:

> 子貢問君子。子曰:「先行其言, 而後從之。」
> Zigong asked about exemplary persons *(junzi).* The Master replied: "They first accomplish what they are going to say, and only then say it."[29]

Here, the Master's point is that only the person's conduct (accomplishment) can reveal his commitment to pursue the Way. The only way to determine whether you are a *junzi* (whether you're really committed to following the Way) is by seeing whether you actually follow the Way. If a person fails to follow the Way, it cannot be that he resolved to do so but due to weakness of will failed to follow through; if he fails to follow the Way, it is because he had not in fact resolved to follow the way—at least not with the degree of commitment he had believed or avowed. More generally, when we fail to do what we avowed that we would do, it is not that our will is too weak and so we fail to follow through; it is rather that we discover now what we are actually committed to—indeed, that we were in fact not committed, or not as strongly committed, to the action that we earlier avowed we would take.

Consider, next, 4.24:

> 子曰:「君子欲訥於言, 而敏於行。」
> The Master said, "The exemplary person *(junzi)* wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act.

Similar considerations apply. The Master's point is not that the *junzi* are slow to commit, as if commitment phobia is a virtue. The point is rather about the *communication of* commitment. The Master advises that one ought to be slow to express one's commitment because it is only one's conduct (accomplishment) *ex post* that reveals one's true commitment. The *junzi* is quick to act, slow to speak—acting *before* speaking, realizing before avowing commitment. For no avowal of one's commitment prior to the deed can settle the question of one's commitment or degree of commitment; only one's actual deeds can do so. Again, it is only via the unfolding of one's actual deed that one can be in a position to say definitively what one was actually committed to, and how strongly one was committed to it.

Consider another passage, 12.3:

> 司馬牛問仁。子曰:「仁者其言也訒。」
> 曰:「其言也訒, 斯謂之仁已乎?」
> 子曰:「為之難, 言之得無訒乎?」
> Sima Niu inquired about authoritative conduct *(ren).* The Master replied, "An authoritative person is slow to speak."
>
> "Does just being slow to speak make one authoritative?" he asked.
>
> The Master replied, "When something is difficult to accomplish, how can one but be slow to speak?"

This passage articulates the idea that possessing the quality of being slow to speak (that is, taking due care not to express or avow commitment before commitment is actually realized in action) does not make one a *junzi.* For what makes one a junzi is that one actually realizes in one's conduct certain difficult commitments (commitments with a certain content, associated with following the Way).

Now the Master's reply in 12.3 might be taken to suggest that it is only with difficult activities or projects that one should be slow to avow one's commitment, waiting until after the deed has been performed. Or that it is only with difficult deeds that one cannot be certain of one's commitment, or degree of commitment. But I reject these readings. It is with both difficult and easy deeds alike that one cannot be certain of one's commitment, or degree of commitment, until after the deed has been done (or not done). In all actions—difficult or otherwise—the commitment comes to be realized *in* the action, *through* the deed.[30]

In 2.13, 4.24, and 12.3, the *junzi* is slow to speak—the *junzi* does not say anything (that is, express his intent) until after accomplishing what he does—because whatever he might say *ex ante* as a statement of his intention would be merely provisional. This is why the *junzi* says what he is going to say only *ex post.* One cannot determine what one's true intention (or degree of commitment) is before one acts, for it is only when the intention is manifested in action that even the agent himself can be in a position to determine what his intention (or degree of practical commitment) is. Note that the point is not—or not merely—an epistemic one. It is not as if introspection or sincerity of expression at the time of action regarding one's intention can be relied on here. It is not that if we just looked deeply enough into our own souls, or were completely honest with ourselves, that we could settle *ex ante* the content of our intention (independently of the action). And this is because it is only when the intention is manifested in action that even the agent (or anyone else) can retrospectively determine conclusively, definitively, what his intention is. Only through the intention's manifestation in action does the content of the intention become determinate—settled metaphysically.

Finally, consider the following exchange between The Master and Ranyou in *Analects* 6.12:

> 冉求曰:「非不說子之道, 力不足也。」
> 子曰:「力不足者, 中道而廢。今女畫。
> Ranyou said, "It is not that I do not rejoice in the Way *(dao)* of the Master, but that I do not have the strength to walk it."
>
> The Master said, "Those who do not have the strength for it collapse along the Way. But with you, you have drawn your own line before you start."[31]

I take this passage to be conveying the following: if Ranyou ends up falling short of practicing the Way, even though he avows a commitment to it (that is, he avows that he rejoices or delights in the Way), his falling short is not

explained by the fact that his will is too weak, that he lacks the strength of will to follow through despite his commitment. Instead, if Ranyou ends up falling short of following the Way, it is because he was not as committed to the Way—as resolved to pursuing it—as he had avowed. (That is, he actually does not delight or rejoice in the Way to the degree he initially believed or claimed.) This is the point of the Master's criticism of Ranyou: that he *has drawn the line before he starts.* Whether Ranyou truly rejoices in the Way (or intends to follow the Way) is not something that can be settled *ex ante*, before actually acting, but only *ex post*, after actually having acted. In other words, we can properly ascribe intentions to ourselves only after actually having acted, and this is because the subject's intention is not separable from the action; it is rather at work, coming to be realized, actualized, *in* the action.

V. Moral Psychological Implications

I want to unfold my Confucian-inspired account further by considering its relation to some issues in moral psychology: in particular, weakness of will, self-deception, and moral regret. In the Confucian-inspired picture of agency I have been developing, there is no such thing as weakness of will, but only *(ex ante)* misunderstanding of one's will and *(ex post)* realization of one's will. It is worth registering the affinities with Aristotle's view that it is never the case that an *akratic* (weak-willed) agent acts against his own conclusion of practical reasoning.[32] For Aristotle, the agent's voluntary action always coincides with the conclusion (the action *is* the conclusion) of the agent's practical reasoning, however defective this reasoning might have been. When it comes to the agent's practical reasoning, actions speak louder than words. The odd disavowals of actions one hears from *akratic* agents ("I know I don't *really* want to do this") are merely mouthed, not truly meant. Such an agent may be able to articulate decisive practical arguments against the very action he is voluntarily taking, but he utters such arguments "only as a drunk recites the verses of Empedocles."[33]

I have been suggesting that for some early Confucians there is no such thing as weakness of will, but only *(ex ante)* misunderstanding of one's will and *(ex post)* realization of one's will. Another way to understand the idea is to say that there is no such thing as *weakness of will*, but only *self-deception* of a certain sort. Cases such as avowing one's commitment to following the Way but failing to do so are to be understood as deception *about* the self—a kind of lack of self-knowledge.

Self-deception might be perceived in two ways. One way is to see self-deception as involving the self acting to deceive itself. In this case, the self is the agent or source of its own deception: the self is deceived *by* the self. A different way to think about self-deception is to see it as involving the self's deception about a particular subject matter, namely the self: the self is

deceived *about* the self. Here, being self-deceived involves lacking self-knowledge or having false beliefs about the self: beliefs that had one gotten them correctly would count as self-knowledge.[34] It is this latter conception of self-deception as a kind of self-ignorance that I am attributing to the early Confucians in connection with their conception of the relationship between agent and deed.

For agents in the Confucian social world, the retrospective negative moral emotion that accompanies the discovery that one was not in fact committed, or not as strongly committed, to the action as one earlier avowed is shame. To give just two examples of discussions of shame from the *Analects*:

> 子曰:「君子恥其言而過其行。」
> The Master said, "Exemplary persons would feel shame if their words were better than their deeds." (14.27)

> 子曰:「古者言之不出, 恥躬之不逮也。」
> The ancients were loath to speak because they would be ashamed if they personally did not live up to what they said.[35] (4.22)

I argue that, for the early Confucians, the retrospective negative moral emotion that accompanies the relevant *ex post* discovery that one has not lived up to certain ideals (associated with the Way) is a kind of *shame* or *regret* that is partly constituted by the following disappointing thought: that I was not actually who I had taken myself to be. Such shame or regret can be contrasted with *guilt*, the central moral emotion of modern (Western) morality, or what Bernard Williams calls "the morality system."[36] Guilt as a moral emotion is connected with the picture of a separable causal center of agency or volitional engine that develops out of the Christian tradition. It involves the thought of one's emotional pain or suffering as deserved, properly self-imposed.

To bring out these respects in which the kind of shame I have identified with the early Confucian moral psychology is different from the guilt associated with modern morality, let us consider, first, Nietzsche's discussion, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, of a passage in Spinoza, in which Spinoza is dwelling on the question of how to understand the *"morsus conscientiae"* (the sting of conscience) "before the invention of the bad conscience [guilt]." Nietzsche writes:

> "The opposite of gaudium," he [Spinoza] finally said to himself—"a sadness, accompanied by the image of a past matter that has turned out in a manner contrary to all expectation." For thousands of years, instigators of evil overtaken by punishment have felt no different than Spinoza with regard to their transgression: "something has unexpectedly gone wrong here," *not*: "I should not have done that . . . ."[37]

What I want to suggest is that something like the feeling of sadness or disappointment accompanied by the thought that *something has unexpectedly*

gone wrong here characterizes the kind of moral regret experienced by members of the early Confucian world.

Next, consider Hilary Bok's example in which one has done something wrong, on account of which one experiences a painful response. She herself calls the kind of response she has in mind "guilt," but I think what she means is better described as a kind of regret that should be distinguished from our common understanding of guilt as a pained response that is *deserved,* properly self-*imposed.* Allow me to quote her at length:

> The relation between the recognition that one has done something wrong and the guilt one suffers as a result . . . is like the relation between the recognition that one's relationship with someone one truly loves has collapsed and the pain of heartbreak. Heartbreak is not a pain one inflicts on oneself as a punishment for loss of love; it is not something we undergo because we deserve it. . . . Similarly, the recognition that one has done something wrong causes pain. But this pain is not a form of suffering that we inflict on ourselves as a punishment but an entirely appropriate response to the recognition of what we have done for two reasons. First our standards define the kind of life we think we should lead and what we regard as valuable in the world, in our lives, and in the lives of others. They articulate what matters to us, and living by them is therefore by definition of concern to us. If we have indeed violated them, we have slighted what we take to be of value, disregarded principles we sincerely think we should live by, and failed to be the sorts of people we think we should be. The knowledge that we have done these things must be painful to us.[38]

For Bok, the feeling of pain on account of realizing that one has not lived up to moral standards—that one has failed to live up to certain ideals, to realize certain values in one's conduct, to be or become the sort of person one should be—need not involve the idea of suffering or punishment properly imposed by the self because it is deserved. Heartbreak is an instance of a more general class of pained emotional responses that we can distinguish from a pained response such as guilt (commonly understood), in that heartbreak typically does not involve the thought that one's suffering is deserved, properly imposed as punishment. Bok suggests that in addition to heartbreak there are other pained emotional responses that involve the thought that one has not lived up to certain standards (moral or otherwise) but that are not accompanied by the thought that one's suffering is deserved, properly imposed as punishment. I want to suggest that the kind of moral regret experienced by members of the early Confucian world involves the pained thought that something has gone wrong here, but unaccompanied by the thought that one's pain or suffering is deserved, properly imposed as punishment.

I shall call the kind of response that involves the elements described by Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Bok as *shame as self-disappointment.* To be subject to this variety of shame (characterized from the first-person standpoint) is to have the pained realization that I was not actually who I had taken myself to be, accompanied by feelings of sadness at this realization. Shame as self-

disappointment, as a particular mode of thinking of oneself with feeling, is the central form of moral regret for the early Confucians. It is distinct from the central form of moral regret that has emerged in modern morality, namely guilt. As a cognitively charged moral emotion, shame as self-disappointment does not involve the further thought (which one does find in the case of guilt in the modern world) that one's suffering is deserved, properly imposed as punishment. It also does not depend on the Christian metaphysical notion of one's having the option of doing otherwise. It therefore represents an interesting moral psychological alternative to the Christian form of first-personal moral regret, namely guilt (or self-blame), which as traditionally understood relies on the notion that one could have done otherwise.

Conclusion

To summarize, some contemporary commentators (Fingarette, Rosemont) claim that the early Confucians did not have the notions of agent, action, and choice. Others (Nivison, Schwartz) disagree, arguing that not only did the early Confucians have such notions, but aspects of their conceptions of agency are strikingly similar to contemporary causal conceptions of agency. In the face of this interpretative divide, I have offered an "intermediate" account of the early Confucian conception of agency, focusing on the relationship between agent and deed. In particular, I have argued that, insofar as the early Confucians were capable of distinguishing between actions and mere natural events, they did have the notions of agent, action, and choice. But, crucially, this does not mean that they conceived of the relation between agent and deed in either "inner" or causal terms. Instead, for the early Confucians, the relationship between agent and deed was seen as one of *expression* (or *actualization*). On this picture, the agent is not 'behind" and "before" the deed, but rather comes to be realized through the deed.

Notes

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1 – It should be noted that this generalization applies primarily to Western commentators.

2 – Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 18–56.

3 – Joel Kupperman, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 102. See also Kupperman, "Confucian Ethics and Weakness of Will," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1981):1–8.

4 – Henry Rosemont, Jr., "Why Take Rights Seriously? A Confucian Critique," in Leroy S. Rounder, ed., *Human Rights and the World Religions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 173.

5 – Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 378. It is important to note that Hansen's denial of a distinction between event and agent causation in early Chinese thought, on the one hand, and Fingarette's and Rosement's denial of a conception of choice in early Confucian thought, on the other, are not logically equivalent. Thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

6 – David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. with introd. Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), p. 89.

7 – Ibid., p. 84.

8 – Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 72.

9 – Other commentators who have been influenced by Nivison's readings of the early Confucians include Chris Fraser and Kai-yee Wong, "Weakness of Will, the Background, and Chinese Thought," in Bo Mou, ed., *Searle's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

10 – Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

11 – *Analects* 14:45. See *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. with introd. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

12 – It is worth noting that *intentions* are central to Confucian ethics developed in contemporary Chinese Confucianism. For example, the New Confucian Ming-huei Lee has coined the term *"cunxin lunli xue"* 存心倫理學 to translate Weber's *Gesinnungsethik* or ethics of conviction, which Lee argues is the best account of Confucian ethics.

13 – On this point, see Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

14 – Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 129.

15 – Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011), p. 3.

16 – Ibid., p. 68.

17 – Examples include Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, and Searle, *Rationality in Action*.

18 – Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism*.

19 – The assumption that mental states play distinctive causal roles combined with the assumption that the distinctive causal roles are played by brain states (or, more precisely, the physical properties of brain states) have led some philosophers to conclude that mental states are identical to brain states.

20 – Here and throughout, I use "he" as the unmarked pronoun, which is semantically gender-neutral.

21 – "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe [Oxford: Blackwell, 1972], § 621).

22 – This is what I meant when I said the nominalization *intention* could mislead.

23 – Perhaps there is some story to be told that connects why this is the case to the emphasis on practice (the Way) rather than on theory (Truth).

24 – For an example of the former, see Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events;* for an example of the latter, see Searle, *Rationality in Action.*

25 – Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swenson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2011), I, §13, 26.

26 – Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 241.

27 – Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology and First Philosophy*.

28 – Cf., Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, and Ames, "The Classical Chinese Self and Hypocrisy," in *Self and Deception: A Cross-Cultural Philosophical Enquiry*: "for Confucius, knowing is resolutely performative—it is 'realizing' in the sense of 'making real.' Knowing is not a state of mind, but having the wherewithal to

accomplish a given action, and actually doing it." (See also Ames, "Prolegomena to a Confucian Epistemology," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991], and "Confucius and the Ontology of Knowing," in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988]).

29 – Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 79. As the editors observe in an endnote, the Dingzhou text is more succinct: "Having taken action, their words follow from it" (p. 233).

30 – Nietzsche provides a wonderfully insightful explanation of why we are inclined to the illusion of the self (or the commitment or intention or will of the self) as a prior sufficient cause behind and before the deed:

> Since in the great majority of cases there has been an exercise of will only when the effect of the command—that is obedience; that is, the action—was to be *expected*, the *appearance* has translated itself into the feeling, as if there were *a necessity of effect*. In short, he who wills believes with a fair amount of certainty that will and action are somehow one; he ascribes the success, the carrying out of the willing, to the will itself, and thereby enjoys an increase of the sensation of power that accompanies all success. (*Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. with comment. Walter Kaufman [New York: Random House, 1966], sec. 19, p. 25)

31 – Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 106.

32 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985). We think of *akrasia* as so-called action against one's own best judgment.

33 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

34 – For contemporary discussion of the two ways of construing self-deception, see Richard Holton, "What is the Role of the Self in Self-Deception?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 101 (2001): 53–69.

35 – See also *Analects* 2.18: "The Master said: . . . To speak with few errors and to act with few regrets is the substance of taking office."

36 – See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

37 – See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark and A. Swenson, 2nd sec., par. 15.

38 – Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility*, pp. 168–169.

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