

Grounding Confucian Moral Psychology in *Rasa* Theory: A Commentary on Shun Kwong-loi's "Anger, Compassion, and the Distinction between First and Third-Person"

Abstract

Shun Kwong-loi argues that the distinction between first- and third-person points of view does not play as explanatory a role in our moral psychology as has been supposed by contemporary philosophical discussions. He draws insightfully from the Confucian tradition to better elucidate our everyday experiences of moral emotions, arguing that it offers an alternative and more faithful perspective on our experiences of anger and compassion. However, unlike the distinction between first- and third-person points of view, Shun's descriptions of anger and compassion leave unarticulated what would be necessary to differentiate these responses from non-moral responses. Here, I make a friendly suggestion on how this explanatory gap might be filled, providing complementary grounding for Shun's observations by way of K. C. Bhattacharyya's phenomenological analysis of feeling. It fills the gap by means of a gradation in the possible depth of emotional responses found in the *a priori* structure of a feeling experience for any subject. The payoff of such a comparison between Shun's explication of Confucian moral psychology and Bhattacharyya's explication of *rasa* theory is not only a possible phenomenological grounding for the former but also a potential way to articulate a missing ethics in Bhattacharyya's thought.

Keywords

Moral Emotions, Aesthetic Emotions, Confucian Ethics, *Rasa*, P. F. Strawson, K. C. Bhattacharyya

1. Introduction

In "Anger, Compassion, and the Distinction between First and Third-Person," Shun Kwong-loi critiques a longstanding psychological distinction between the first- and third-person points of view, commonly found in contemporary philosophical discussions of emotional responses (hereafter, "*Distinction*"). According to this, there are two distinct kinds of responses that fall into first-person and third-person categories: the first-person point of view concerns the response of someone directly involved in a given situation, such as resentment in the case of anger; while the third-person point of view concerns that of someone not directly involved, such as indignation—the latter being understood as 'generalized or vicarious analogues' of the former [Strawson 1962, 15, cited in Shun forthcoming]. However, Shun argues that this distinction between points of view does not play as sufficiently explanatory a role in our moral experiences as has been supposed. He draws insightfully from the Confucian tradition to elucidate a range of everyday experiences of moral emotions, arguing in particular that it offers alternative and more expansive articulations of such varied experiences of anger and compassion. Resentment and indignation insufficiently characterise a rich plethora of moral anger responses, which are based on the various aspects of a situation salient for someone *S* who is

responding to it. And the distinction between first- and third-person points of view would be at best understood as an artificial line drawn across a continuum of how *S* might feel related to those involved in the situation, which would still only be one aspect of the situation (hereafter, “*Continuum*”).

Yet, part of the appeal of *Distinction* (especially in its Strawsonian form) was that it offered a straightforward way to ground the difference between moral and non-moral responses in our shared psychology: first-person responses are non-moral, while third-person ones are moral. In this commentary, inspired by Shun’s discussion and hoping to expand it, I would like to make a friendly suggestion for a possible way that his account may also ground this moral/non-moral difference, while doing so at a more fundamental level: in the *a priori* structure of feeling experiences. I do by locating *Continuum* within the framework of K. C. Bhattacharyya’s phenomenological analysis of feeling. This engagement not only offers *Continuum* a possible grounding for the moral/non-moral difference, but also points towards how to articulate an otherwise missing ethics in Bhattacharyya’s thought.

2. Explanatory Demands for *Continuum*

Under *Distinction*, there are two corresponding kinds of emotional responses thought to be fundamentally different in nature: in P. F. Strawson’s extremely influential account, only responses from the third-person point of view (such as indignation), in virtue of their ‘impersonal or vicarious character,’ would qualify as *moral* responses [Strawson 1962, 15]. Responses understood as pertaining only to the first-person point of view, such as gratitude, are accordingly non-moral. One implication of *Continuum* is an enlarged domain of moral responses that would include, *pave* Strawson, emotional responses such as gratitude. Having a larger domain of moral responses might be seen as a strength of *Continuum*, in that it better captures certain everyday assessments of agents as being more or less moral even in relation to their responses to situations in which they are directly involved. After all, as the Confucians and Adam Smith that were cited by Shun had observed, we ordinarily deem an agent who responds with a lack of gratitude, or even ingratitude, to an act of goodwill to be morally problematic or perhaps even liable to certain blaming responses.

However, one intuitive pull of *Distinction* was that the psychological character of moral experience was distinguishable from non-moral ones: emotional responses were moral in virtue of a common feature in such experiences—that is, a third-person point of view. While this might have excluded responses such as gratitude, it also excluded metacognitive responses such as the Aha! Experience—that is, an individual’s response to their becoming aware of a proposition being true (Dorsch 2016)—or aesthetic responses such as the terrible feeling when we behold Goya’s painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Under Shun’s current presentation of *Continuum*, it is unclear what aspects of our experiences could be the

basis of ruling out something like the Aha! Experience or a feeling in response to an artwork, while maintaining anger and compassion as moral responses. This is especially so since he understands ‘situation’ so broadly as to ‘include occurrences and happenings, someone’s being in a certain condition, someone’s doing something, or just any state of affairs’ [Shun forthcoming]. A proponent of *Continuum* could possibly accept that the moral domain subsumes responses that are otherwise ordinarily understood to be non-moral (and perhaps exclusively epistemic or aesthetic), or accept that there is an explanatory demand for *Continuum* to account for the moral nature of responses such as anger and compassion. Yet, even if one were tempted to accept the former (taking in account the Confucians’ moralised and aestheticised emphasis on learning), there remains a need to characterise the moral in at least some minimal way—a necessary condition—that does not render it an empty designator for any response to any given situation.

Furthermore, Shun’s psychological observations are based on Confucian texts and the ways in which we speak of emotional responses in the English language today. While they might be astute and heuristically useful, it would be inadequate to simply extrapolate from these to a universal claim about human moral experience. It would seem just as plausible under *Continuum*, as it currently stands, that some language users would not necessarily find Shun’s examples of how we speak of emotional responses familiar or convincing: one can easily imagine a particularly philosophical breed of anglophones (especially in certain British departments) that are so smitten with *Distinction* that ‘expressions [of compassion] such as “I am pained and distressed by what happened,” or “I cannot bear to see this outcome”’ are understood only if reduced to expressions of “sympathy,” “empathy,” “projective imagination,” or “perspective taking”’ [Shun forthcoming]. More than a worry concerning psychologism about morality, such an extrapolation cannot also support Shun’s [ibid.] own intention for *Continuum* ‘to be applicable not just to the Confucian position, but to these familiar experiences [of anger and compassion] as such.’ That is, in order for *Continuum* to go beyond contingent (albeit shared) linguistic expressions of anger and compassion, there is a need to account for how *Continuum* would hold for *any* individual experiencing such responses and not just for Confucians and most anglophones.

To sum, a robust account of *Continuum* must thus satisfy the two explanatory desiderata of *differentiation* and *universality*, otherwise met by *Distinction*:

- (i) *Differentiation*: An account of responses must provide some necessary condition of moral responses that excludes at least some non-moral responses.
- (ii) *Universality*: An account of responses must hold for all individuals.

3. Phenomenological Grounding

A possible way for *Continuum* to meet these desiderata is by turning to Bhattacharyya's analysis of the concept of *rasa* (often translated as "savour" or "taste"), understood as 'feeling par excellence' [Bhattacharyya 1930, 195]. This would allow *Continuum* to satisfy *differentiation*, by means of a gradation of responses, and *universality*, given that the gradation is meant to be an *a priori* structure that holds for all experiences of feeling.

Bhattacharyya's analysis furnishes us with three grades of feeling: *primary*, *sympathetic*, and *contemplative*, all of which may occur simultaneously in a feeling individual *S* and may be found in our responses to any given situation (not just artworks).¹ As will be clear, "sympathetic" here is not used in the sense avoided by Shun—that is, 'understood in terms of one's responding from a "third-person perspective" on harm to another party out of a concern for the other party's well-being' [forthcoming]. In primary feeling, *S* has a response *in* a particular situation, where what is salient in *S*'s experience is a particular object identified with the feeling. In sympathetic feeling, *S* feels the particular primary feeling of someone *S'* in a particular situation (who may be *S* themselves or imaginary as in an artwork), where what is salient in *S*'s experience is the particular primary feeling and the situation *S'* is in (including any particular relation *S* has to *S'*). A sympathetic feeling may thus be understood as a response *to* a particular situation involving an *S'*. In contemplative feeling, *S* feels feeling as such, where what is salient in *S*'s experience is the feeling *sans* particularities. It is a further deepening of sympathetic feeling into the contemplative grade, through aestheticisation, that transforms the experience into one of *rasa*. A contemplative feeling is a response *independent of, yet arising out of*, a particular situation, *S* themselves, and the object. For example, consider how our enjoyment of the *rasa* of the Furious (*raudram*) emerges from the constituents of the play and our sympathetic response to Medea's situation in Euripides' play: as we behold Medea in her golden chariot at the end of the play, we enjoy the Furious as an 'idealised feeling' which exists independently of the play and our response [Bhattacharyya 1930, 199].²

Shun's descriptions of anger and compassion may be understood as responses lying between the first two, non-aesthetic grades of primary and sympathetic feelings under the above analysis. Let us first

¹ These three grades also map onto the traditional distinction in Indian aesthetics between transitory emotions (*vyabhicharibhava*), stable or durable emotions (*sthayibhava*), and *rasa*, with the classic formulation of *rasa* in the *Natyashastra* being: '[r]asa arises from the conjunction of factors [*vibhava*], reactions [*anubhava*], and transitory emotions [*vyabhicharibhava*]' [N 6.31]. What is crucial for *Continuum* here is that this conjunction of factors, reactions, and transitory emotions (primary feelings) constitutes a *situation* (rather than an object) to which one responds with a stable emotion (sympathetic feeling). Accordingly, Arindam Chakrabarti translates "*vibhava*," "*anubhava*," and "*vyabhicharibhava*" as 'situational causal inputs,' 'expressive outputs,' and 'transient feelings' [Chakrabarti 2010].

² *Rasa* theory traditionally lists thirty-five transitory emotions, seven stable emotions, and seven *rasas*, but there are longstanding debates in psychology about whether there are basic emotions and what they might be [cf. Eickers, Loiza, and Prinz 2017]. Even so, neither Bhattacharyya nor Shun need to commit to any position on this issue.

turn to these in the various anger responses in Shun's driving example. Where S is a driver endangered by the reckless driving of another, what would be salient in S 's primary anger (resentment) would be that of having their worthiness challenged, identified with the reckless driver's action as the object. What would be salient in the sympathetic anger, on the other hand, would then be S 's feeling of their own primary anger within the context of the wider driving situation. Notably, S 's sympathetic anger (indignation) is detached from particularities of driver's reckless action as it is valenced in S 's primary anger. S responds to the situation in which the fact that S' is also S is merely one element being responded to, such that S 's response pertains principally to the situation as such. In this way, S would 'still acknowledge that the offending act contains an implicit "insulting message," but in the same manner as [S] would if the victim were a stranger' [Shun forthcoming]. Where S' is not S , differential relations would entail differential responses. Nevertheless, the response to the *situation* remains at the sympathetic grade. Anger that "resides in the self" would thus be when primary anger is predominant, whereas anger that "resides in things" would be when sympathetic anger is predominant. This, as in *Continuum*, does not require the fundamental positing of a distinction between first- and third-person points of view. Just as Shun [ibid.] describes the 'progression' of responding increasingly with anger that "resides in things" as opposed to "in the self," the deepening of anger from the primary to sympathetic grade is also one that comes with 'increasing age and experience.'

Turning now to compassion, we may perhaps more straightforwardly understand compassion to be a sympathetic feeling, in as much as it involves S 's response to S' 's primary hurt feeling in response to a harm. Again, where S' is not S , differential relations would entail differential responses. Notably, sympathetic feelings are both *intimate* and *unmediated* (in the senses used by Shun). They are intimate in that, as we saw before, S responds to the situation in which the fact that S' is also S is merely one element being responded to, and this fact alone does not change the relevant kind of response to the situation. They are unmediated in that they arise upon S 's 'coming to be aware of the situation, without being further explained by some other kind of concern' [Shun forthcoming]. This is because sympathetic feelings (such as compassion), regardless of whether or not it is directed at a situation where S is also S' , do not differ in their object (of harm) in the primary feeling (of hurt), which part-constitutes the situation in focus and causally underlies feeling at the deeper grades. But whereas anger would be morally underdeveloped where the primary feeling and its object are predominant in experience, compassion would be morally underdeveloped where the relation (or lack thereof) between S and S' is predominant. With underdeveloped compassion, the relation would be predominant in experience in contexts such as the special Confucian ones listed by Shun [ibid.], 'vivid presentation [where the relation between S and S' is one of imagined identity], close relationship, [and] sense of accountability'; but the lack of relation would be predominant in experience in relation to distant

suffering across the globe. Hence, these different forms of moral responses, anger and compassion, are underdeveloped in as much as they involve ‘overemphasizing oneself’ or ‘underemphasizing others,’ respectively [Shun 2020, 423].

Now that we have located Shun’s psychological observations within Bhattacharyya’s analytical framework, we can now better see how the gradation of feelings affords us the required *differentiation* between moral and non-moral responses. Responses such as anger that “resides in things,” compassion, or gratitude share a common experiential structure in that they are all of the sympathetic grade. Rather than being moral because they view as if from a removed, third-person vantage point, such responses can be said to be moral in as much as they meet a necessary condition of S responding to S' within a given situation and under a certain primary feeling (often duress)—which may be differentially inflected by the differential relation between S and S' . This, however, is not a sufficient condition: S , for example, may be amused at a primary frightful feeling of their own. Conversely, responses such as anger that “resides in the self” or the Aha! Experience share a common experiential structure in that they are of the primary grade. As discussed above, anger that “resides in the self” is only primary, since what is salient in an experience of it is a particular object identified with the feeling. Meanwhile, as a metacognitive feeling, the Aha! Experience is not of the sympathetic grade because it responds not to another feeling but a cognition. The gradation, further, allows *Continuum* to more specifically differentiate moral from aesthetic responses. The terrible feeling in response to Goya’s painting or the *rasa* of the Furious in response to Euripides’ play both share a common experiential structure in that they are all of the contemplative grade. Since feeling at such a grade is devoid of the particularities of either S or S' and whatever relation that may exist between them, it cannot be said to be moral.

Since the threefold gradation of feeling is found in the structure of our experiences of feelings as such, locating Shun’s contingent psychological observations within a phenomenological framework also serves to undergird his claims (from Confucian texts and most anglophone experiences) with an *a priori* account of any feeling experience—satisfying his own aspiration to *universality*. That is, as an *a priori* structure, the gradation of feelings—and hence *Continuum*—would hold for *any* feeling subject, since it underlies all experiences of feeling. Thus, even if the aforementioned particularly philosophical breed of anglophones were to insist on finding familiar only linguistic expressions of *Distinction* for, say compassion, we now have positive reason to think that they do not present psychological experiences that are counterexamples to Shun’s observations so much as exceedingly narrow uses of language. Bhattacharyya’s phenomenological analysis of feeling therefore provides an attractive way for *Continuum* to satisfy the two explanatory desiderata, *differentiation* and *universality*.

4. Future Orientations

In contemporary scholarship in philosophy and psychology, there are few instances of comparisons between Chinese and Indian non-Buddhist traditions—and fewer still on emotions.³ This is woefully unfortunate, given the resonances between how feelings are discussed in the Confucian tradition and *rasa* theory, as I have suggested above. And more still can be drawn from the comparison I have only briefly made here. For example, in attending to the contemplative grade of feeling, we find a new distinction in points of view: not a moral one between first- and third-persons as in *Distinction* but an *aesthetic* one between the particular feeling individual and idealised aesthete (referred to by Bhattacharyya as the “Heart Universal” [*sabrdaya*]). In *rasa* theory more broadly, it is the connoisseur [*rasika* or ‘one of taste’] who progresses to be able to feel as the idealised aesthete alongside the artist, ‘thanks to, among other things, [the *rasika*’s] study of literature’ (*Abb* 1.281). And this echoes the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi’s frequent exhortations to his reader to “savour [*wanwei* or *zhiwei*]” the Confucian classics (particularly the *Odes*) in order to refine their heart-mind [*xin*], shared by both authors (the sages) and reader, to become familiar with pattern-principle [*li*]:

Now that I have glossed the *Odes*, it has been explained and thus is easily comprehensible. But there is still the need to seriously recite and chant, savoring the taste of the moral pattern-principles, and chew on the flavor before one can gain [from reading it]. If you read the *Odes* cursorily and stop after only two or three days, not only will you not get the flavor but [you will] also forget [what you have read], so nothing is accomplished. The ancients said the *Odes* rouses the emotions, so you have to read in such a way that emotions are roused. Only then are you reading the *Odes*. If there is no such arousal, you are not reading the *Odes*. [Ng trans. 2019, 89]

That is, for Zhu, the contemplative grade of feeling is a necessary aspect of reading, which is itself ‘one task in the investigation of things [*gewu yishi*]’ [Ng trans. 2019, 75].

Admittedly, it is not necessary for *Continuum* to satisfy *differentiation* and *universality* by means of a Bhattacharyyan detour. I anticipate Shun [cf. 2020] might be able to furnish a similar account from a phenomenological explication of the Neo-Confucian idea of “one body.” But the payoffs of this present comparison between Shun’s explication of *Continuum* and Bhattacharyya’s explication of *rasa* theory is not only one possible way of providing phenomenological grounding for the former. Bhattacharyya’s oeuvre is often thought to be curiously missing an ethics, and dialogue with the Confucians seems to promise one possible way of articulating what this missing ethics might look like. For example, we would be able to explicate from the above how non-moral responses can have a role in

³ For a discussion pertaining to the state of philosophical scholarship on Chinese and Indian non-Buddhist traditions, see Mcleod 2018; for a very broad, survey-level discussion of the relation between *rasa* and savouring [*wei*] in the psychology of emotion, see Sundararajan 2010.

our moral lives: particular metacognitive responses at the primary grade may draw our attention to values [cf. Chappell 2019] and aesthetic responses at the contemplative grade may better sensitise us non-egoistically to morally relevant feelings [cf. Chakrabarti 2010]. At the very least, I hope to have expressed an interest, from the point of view of Indian aesthetics, in Shun's critique of *Distinction* and an open invitation for him and similar Confucian-inspired philosophers to engage in dialogue with the *rasa* theorists.

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