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EDUCATING FOR VIRTUOSO LIVING: PAPERS FROM THE NINTH EAST-WEST PHILOSOPHERS' CONFERENCE

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Introduction

The present issue of *Philosophy East and West* presents a selection of papers from the Ninth East-West Philosophers' Conference held at the East-West Center in Honolulu in 2005. The theme of the conference was education, and given the large number of fine papers presented, the selection for this issue was no easy task. The papers we present here address a common topic—the nature of moral education and the role of aesthetic experience in moral education and moral practice—though from very different perspectives, and it is because of this variety of approaches to this topic that we present the group of essays gathered in this volume.

The link between ethics and aesthetics has been explored extensively in Chinese moral theory. We see this connection exploited in the *Daodejing* and developed systematically in the Confucian tradition, as Professors Olberding and Thompson each emphasize in their contributions to this issue. This connection has also been remarked upon in the Western tradition. Kant's critical philosophy introduces this line of thought, and it is developed systematically by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Schopenhauer argues that ethical and aesthetic experience has its roots in an immediate intuition of the world as it is in itself and reflects the deepest form of knowledge of reality. Nietzsche suggests that ethical reflection, if it is to be properly humanistic, can only be understood as a kind of aesthetic criticism of biography. Wittgenstein, developing Schopenhauer's views in the *Tractatus*, argues that "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same." This idea is developed further in his "Lecture on Ethics," in which ethical experience, the "experience *par excellence*," is characterized in terms of aesthetic wonder at the existence and beauty of the world, before being meta-characterized as ineffable.

The line of thought we see developed by Kant, Schopenhauer, and Wittgenstein focuses primarily on the transcendental dimension of values, and on the fact that when we engage in moral or aesthetic reflection, either in deliberation or in assessment, we address ourselves directly to values that cannot be reduced to, and which transcend, empirical description. In such reflection, according to this view, we encounter ourselves and the world in a noumenal rather than a phenomenal aspect. Nietzsche, of course, stands outside this consensus in his rejection of transcendental ontology and of transcendental values. While he shares with Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein the view that aesthetic and ethical engagement is the deepest and most primordial form of human engagement with the world and with ourselves as

subjects and agents, he emphasizes not its transcendent nature, but its immanence, and the fact that in aesthetic and ethical life we are engaged directly and perceptually with the particular and with the concrete.

This Nietzschean line of thought is taken up in ethics in the West by contemporary moral particularists (Dancy 2004, Baier 1985, 1994, Garfield 2000), who emphasize that our moral knowledge is acquired by reflective consideration of the appropriate affective and behavioral responses to particular episodes, individuals, or situations, and that moral generalizations are never exceptionless, at best encoding post hoc summaries of moral knowledge that is always embedded and always epistemically and motivationally prior to the generalizations we might employ as descriptive shorthands. It is taken up in a different way by aesthetic pluralists (Krausz 1993, 2000), who argue that the interpretation of a work of art or the proper performance of a piece of music is not a matter that can be codified, but that multiple interpretations or performances have equally good claim to be correct, with educated aesthetic judgment, as opposed to a set of rules, required for criticism.

These strains in recent Western philosophy have led many to the view of moral education as a process not of teaching golden rules, moral theories, or game theory, but rather as the cultivation of a particular kind of moral character (Baier 1994, Sprod 2001). The character to be cultivated, according to this view, is not simply a set of virtues, understood as dispositions to act in particular ways, but also skills in moral perception, and affective sets. Moral cultivation is seen from this perspective to be a cultivation, *inter alia*, of a kind of aesthetic response to interpersonal situations, and of a virtuoso, not merely a virtuous, skill in navigating moral situations.

All of this is rather new in Western moral thought. But, as the present set of essays make clear, it is a line of thought not at all new in world philosophical history, and hardly particular to the West. For this reason, contemporary Western ethical and aesthetic theory may have a good deal to learn from Asian and African moral and aesthetic thought. Each of these essays makes this point. Amy Olberding, in "The Educative Function of Personal Style in the *Analects*," emphasizes that Confucian moral education, like musical education and inspired by the model of education in the arts, aims at the cultivation of a moral and social expert, and one with a distinctive personal style.

A good piano teacher, Olberding points out, comes to her own craft with a style and functions for her student in part as a model. A good student ends up with a style, one that will reflect in some ways the style of her teacher, but which, if she is really good, will be her own. Her virtuosity will consist neither in her adherence to a set of performance rules she has learned from her teacher, nor in a replication of her teacher's style, but in her ability, in her own distinctive way, to respond appropriately and creatively to the music she performs in the situations in which she performs it. And this is how the Confucian imagines that moral education goes for human beings. The moral and interpersonal styles of our moral educators are not incidental to moral upbringing. They function as important exemplars, not to be replicated, but to be used in the cultivation of our own styles, and our own moral and aesthetic standards. This

allows for a range of creative human moral and aesthetic responses, but ones appropriately constrained by conventions, traditions, and the demands of morality.

Kirill Thompson, in “The Archery of Wisdom in the Stream of Life: Wisdom in the *Four Books* with Zhu Xi’s Reflections,” develops this general perspective with more specificity and with attention to the development of this framework by Zhu Xi. Most importantly, Thompson emphasizes that Zhu Xi interprets wisdom as comprising a number of skills, including preeminently those of “hitting the mark,” “appropriateness,” “discretion,” and “the utmost propriety in a common situation.” As Thompson puts it, Zhu saw the purpose of moral education as “less to achieve a purely rational grasp of higher, abstract forms than to cultivate a nuanced, holistic, responsive sensitivity to the immanent patterns of change and transformation. . . . These patterns were for Zhu always to be experienced embodimentally and responded to situationally.” We hence see in this articulation of Confucian moral theory a concern for the development of a creative, virtuoso ability to see what is necessary in the particular situation, and to respond appropriately to the particular demands of each situation. In this model, ethical and aesthetic cultivation are intimately related, and are irreducibly particularist in character.

Chenyang Li’s “Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between *Li* and *Ren* in Confucius’ *Analects*” might at first appear to be a counterpoint to these readings of Confucian moral theory and of the purpose and nature of Confucian moral education. Using a Chomskyan metaphor of linguistic mastery, Li reads *li* as cultural grammar, and *ren* as cultural mastery. On this account, the final goal of Confucian moral education is *ren*, cultural mastery, but the means of the attainment of *ren* is the mastery of *li*, which is the proximal goal of moral education. One might think, because of the emphasis in *li* on ritual and propriety and because of the fact that grammars are encoded in sets of *rules*, that Li’s position is inconsistent in spirit with those of Olberding and Thompson. Not so. While it represents a different perspective on the kind of aesthetic, virtuoso particularism they advance, there is deep agreement on the structure of moral knowledge and moral education.

We can see this affinity if we attend more carefully to the role that natural language grammars play in our linguistic lives and if we attend to the nature of real linguistic mastery. While grammars may be represented by linguists as sets of rules, and while it *may be* that at *some level* they are represented in our minds as set of rules, nobody has ever learned a grammar by learning a set of rules, and nobody knows how to articulate any such set of rules. We learn the grammar of our natural languages by being socialized into them, and we do this on the basis of our experience of examples of correct performance, coupled with innate but inarticulable abilities to extrapolate from these examples. The role of exemplars and of our human ability to respond appropriately to examples is essential.

Indeed, mastery of grammar is necessary for the mastery of language. But mastery of language cannot amount simply to the regular production of grammatically correct sentences and the failure to produce ungrammatical sentences. That makes it both too easy and too hard. To master language is to say appropriate and interesting things, and no grammar can specify what these are. This kind of mastery is

enabled both by grammatical mastery and growing into the more complex skills encoded by pragmatics and a mastery of the human condition. These in turn, as Li notes, are taught through language, and so require, but are not exhausted by, grammatical mastery. Moreover, linguistic mastery requires that one occasionally, sometimes self-consciously, violate the rules of grammar. Much conversation, rhetoric, and poetry requires just such devices, and the failure to master them is a failure to attain linguistic mastery. So, according to Li's account as well, a properly Confucian understanding of moral cultivation is the cultivation of a kind of virtuosity that requires exquisite sensitivity to the characteristics of particular situations.

These three essays just mentioned all address aspects of Confucian moral theory. Two others in this issue take us into new cultural territory, and indeed into territory not often explored in the pages of this journal. Douglas Allen's "Mahatma Gandhi on Violence and Peace Education" explores the nature of violence and of nonviolence, the location of violence and nonviolence in education itself, and the special role of education in the promotion of nonviolence as a human virtue and as a social fact. One might expect, given Gandhi's own emphasis on the reality of an absolute truth, and on the importance of insistence on that truth (*satyagraha*) that a Gandhian account of education and moral development would be far from the aestheticized, particularist account that we encountered in the Confucian contributions to this issue. Indeed, there are marked, and important, differences between the Gandhian and Confucian view of moral education and of morality, and these will be apparent to even the most casual reader. But Allen emphasizes that there is another dimension to Gandhi's vision of nonviolence and of nonviolent education, and it is here that this program makes real contact with the Confucian program. Allen writes, "Recognizing the specificity and complexity of our contextualized situatedness, we recognize that peace education allows us to grasp relative, partial truths. Our approach should be tolerant and open to other points of view; others have different relative perspectives and different glimpses of truth that we do not have." Even if the truth the insistence on which is the goal of Gandhian education is absolute, the moral sensitivity and understanding of human situations that must be cultivated by actual teachers in actual students will be a kind of perception and attunement that can only be understood as a set of situationally grounded skills.

Philosophy East and West has oriented itself traditionally on a very East-West axis, attending principally to the philosophical traditions of Europe and its colonies in North America and Australia on the one hand and those of Asia on the other. Africa has not often been apparent in this journal, and the philosophy and intellectual traditions of Africa and its diaspora have attracted little attention here. Albert Mosley's "The Moral Significance of the Music of the Black Atlantic" begins to redress this omission. Mosley emphasizes to a greater degree than any of the other contributors to this discussion the explicit connection between aesthetics and ethics, and between performance and appreciation on the one hand and ethical conduct and assessment on the other. His discussion of the importance of improvisation and of the interaction between performer and audience in African and African-American music to the development of moral vision and sensibility demonstrates that the con-

nection between aesthetics and morality need not be merely tacit in high discourse, or the stuff of academic metaphysics. This connection is indeed explicit and central in these cultures and indicates once more the importance of broad philosophical vision that encompasses the philosophical perspectives of all of the world's cultures.

Philosophy East and West presents these essays to our readers as a sample of the offerings of what was a marvelously diverse and intellectually rich conference. This thread of argument is but one in an extraordinary tapestry. More will be available when a volume of selected essays from the conference emerges.

Notes

- 1 – I thank Ms. Nikoleta Papadopoulos for assistance in preparing this volume and Nalini Bhushan for comments on this introduction.

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