On the Idea of 'No Self'

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Presidential Address delivered at the ninety-second Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Diego, CA, on March 30, 2018

***Proceedings and Addresses of the APA*, Volume 92 (November 2018): 78-107**

My presentation is on the idea of 'no self' in Confucian thought. Apparently similar ideas can be found in other ethical traditions, notably in Buddhism, but the way the idea is understood is quite different. For the Confucians, 'no self' is not a claim about what does not exist; it does not deny the existence of a 'self' where the 'self' is understood in a certain way, such as being an enduring subject of a series of psychological states. Instead, 'no self' describes a certain direction of self-transformation, involving one's downplaying the significance that one ascribes to oneself.

The following discussion has two main goals. First, it presents a certain methodological approach to the philosophical study of Confucian thought, namely, a study that brings out its contemporary relevance and links up with contemporary philosophical discourse. The significance of this approach is not limited to Confucianism, as the approach can also be adopted in the study of other ethical traditions that have developed relatively independently of contemporary Western philosophy.

Second, on the basis of this approach, the discussion seeks to make sense of the idea of 'no self' in Confucian thought and, in doing so, highlight certain distinctive features of this ethical tradition. Again, the significance of the discussion goes beyond our understanding of Confucianism. An underlying assumption of this methodological approach is that many of the central ideas in Confucian thought bear on fundamental human experiences that are shared across cultures and times. Accordingly, our discussion of the idea of 'no self' also bears on our own contemporary experiences; indeed, my discussion will often draw on contemporary examples.

The Confucian idea of' no self' is complex with different aspects, and what I will do is to illustrate some aspects of the idea with examples. Given the scope and complexity of the subject matter, I can only provide a sketch of the relevant ideas to convey an overview of what the state of 'no self' involves. While I will draw on past papers that discuss some of these ideas in greater detail, this discussion is part of a larger project that is still in progress.[1]

In section 1, I introduce and distinguish between two dimensions of the Confucian idea of 'no self'. In section 2, I present the methodological approach that underlies this study. In sections 3 to 6, I discuss some examples to illustrate the two dimensions of the idea, namely, anger, one body (or compassion), detachment, and acceptance. In section 7, I discuss the perspective of someone in the state of 'no self'. In section 8, I return to the methodological observations.

1. The Idea of 'No Self'

To begin, let us consider two remarks of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529), two of the later Confucians often referred to in English as "Neo-Confucians". According to Zhu Xi, the sage reaches a state of 'no self' after undertaking a process of self-transformation to its limit:

"When one takes this (the process of self-transformation) to the limit, the 'no self' of the sage does not go beyond this."[2]

Similarly, Wang Yangming presents the state of 'no self' as the basis of the learning of the sage:

"The learning of the sage takes the state of 'no self' as its basis."[3]

These remarks make it clear that the idea of 'no self' is not a claim about what does not exist. It is not the claim that there is no such thing as a 'self', where the 'self' is understood in a certain way. The Chinese expression I have translated as "no self" comprises two characters, the second of which is a first personal pronoun. The first, while it can mean the non-existence or absence of something,

[1] While I will refer to some of my past papers that discuss related ideas, I will not refer to related contemporary philosophical writings as there is a large body of such writings. Some of these writings are cited in my papers. The larger project is a multi-volume work on Confucian moral psychology that is still in progress, and the idea of 'no self' is one of the main themes in the final volume.

[2] *Commentary on the Analects* (*Lunyu Jizhu*) (Sikuquanshu edition): 8.5b-6a.

[3] *The Complete Works of Wang Yangming* (*Wang Wencheng Quanshu*) (Sikuquanshu edition): 7.9b-10a.

can also refer to the state of one's being without something. The expression characterizes the sage, an ideal limit for ethical self-transformation; the sage is someone who is in a state of 'being without oneself'.

What then does this state involve? There are two dimensions, having to do with one's relation to others, and one's relation to one's own psychological states. Consider again two remarks of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. Zhu is explicit that this state of 'no self' does not mean that one cannot distinguish between oneself and others:

"What is meant by 'no self' is that there is no self-centeredness in the way one distinguishes between others and oneself. It does not mean that one has mistaken oneself for others, or others for oneself."[4]

Rather, the point is that one does not draw a distinction *of a certain kind* between oneself and others, which he refers to as a form of self-centeredness. Likewise, Wang speaks of there being no distinction of significance, or no separation, between oneself and others:

"(The sage) does not draw any distinction between oneself and other humans, nor is there any separation of oneself from other things."[5]

So, someone in the state of 'no self' still retains an ordinary distinction between oneself and others; the Confucians do not deny the reality of that distinction. Also, as is commonly known, Confucian thinkers place an emphasis on social relations. We should interact in different ways with others, depending on their different relations to us. So, the state of 'no self' does not exclude this kind of *differential interactions*. What it excludes is any *further* distinction of significance between oneself and others that *goes beyond* the ordinary distinction and this kind of differential interactions. For convenience, I will say that the state of 'no self' excludes the presence of an *emphatic self*; that is, it excludes a way of viewing oneself in relation to others and to the world that draws this further distinction. In sections 3 and 4, we will consider two examples to illustrate what this involves.

For the Confucians, this emphatic self results from one's relating to one's own psychological states in a certain problematic way. Consider, for example, these two remarks of Wang Yangming:

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[4] *Questions and Answers on the Analects* (*Lunyu Huowen*) (Sikuquanshu edition): 23.7a-7b.

[5] *Instructions for Practical Living* (*Chuanxilu*) in Chan, Wing-tsit *Detailed Commentary on Wang Yangming's Instructions for Practical Living* (*Wang Yangming Chuanxilu Xiangzhu Jiping*) (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1983): no. 142.

"(The mind) is like a clear mirror … It reflects things as they come, without retaining any residue. This is what is meant by the saying that 'the sage's emotions follow the ten thousand affairs and he has no emotions (of his own).'"[6]

"The seven emotions follow their natural courses of operation. … But there should not be any 'attachment'…"[7]

Here, the term translated as "affairs" refers to situations that we confront, and the term translated as "emotions" refers to our responses to such situations. The latter term has a broader scope than the English word "emotions", including also such responses as liking or disliking something, or wanting to go after something.

According to Wang, the sage responds in whatever way is appropriate to a situation, in the way that a clear mirror responds with an image that matches an object. The sage does not add anything to the response, and so, in a sense, the response does not come from him. In this sense, "he has no emotions (of his own)." This is contrasted with a scenario in which one adds something to one's responses to situations, resulting in a problematic form of 'attachment'. Here, the term translated as "attachment" has the connotation of one's sticking to or holding on to something. Wang's point is that we should relate to our own psychological states in a way that is free from such attachment. For convenience, I will refer to this as a state of *detachment*. In sections 5 and 6, we will consider some examples to illustrate the contrast between attachment and detachment.

So, the idealized state of 'no self' has two dimensions. First, we do not place any special significance on ourselves by comparison to others, going beyond the ordinary distinction and differential interactions. Second, we are detached from, not attached to, our own psychological states. Before exploring these two dimensions further, I will say something about my approach to the philosophical study of Chinese thought.

2. The Philosophical Study of Chinese Thought – From Philology to Philosophy[8]

[6] *Instructions for Practical Living*: no. 167. The saying cited by Wang Yangming is a saying of another Confucian thinker Cheng Hao (1032-1085).

[7] *Instructions for Practical Living*: no. 290.

[8] In my discussion, I draw on a number of past papers on methodology, in particular: "Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36:3 (September 2009): 455-478; "The Philosophical Study of Chinese Thought," *News and Views: The Journal of the International Academy for Philosophy* 3:1-2 (2011), reprinted in *Journal of East-West Thought* 1:2 (March 2012): 25-37; "Methodological

By the philosophical study of Chinese thought, I mean a study that brings out its contemporary relevance and builds a linkage to contemporary Western philosophical discourse. The approach I adopt has evolved over the years, initially taking one step, then two, and then three.

There is a straightforward way of building a linkage to contemporary philosophical discourse. We view Chinese thought in terms of contemporary philosophical agendas, asking how it addresses such questions as why be moral or how the weakness of will is possible. And we try to fit its ideas into contemporary philosophical conceptual frameworks, such as autonomy or moral reasons. This *one step* approach might suit certain purposes, such as stimulating interest in Chinese thought among contemporary philosophers, or drawing inspiration from Chinese thought for the purpose of one's own philosophical reflections. But as part of an attempt to understand Chinese thought and bring out its distinctive insights, there is a danger to this approach.

Chinese thought evolved against a very different historical and cultural background. The primary concerns of Chinese thinkers are very different from our contemporary philosophical concerns, and their conceptual apparatus also very different from ours. Viewing their ideas in terms of agendas and conceptual frameworks familiar to us from contemporary philosophical discourse might distort our understanding of their perspectives and lead us to lose sight of their distinctive insights. To the extent that studying other traditions of thought is supposed to help highlight alternative perspectives different from what is familiar to us from contemporary philosophical discourse, it is particularly important to avoid viewing other traditions in terms of our own habitual modes of philosophical thinking.

This consideration suggests a *two-step* approach. As the first step, we try to approximate the perspectives of the Chinese thinkers. We carefully study the language, analyze the texts in detail, and take into account the historical context, including their life histories. This is the task of *philology*, understood in a broad sense. As a second step, we undertake more reflective work with these ideas, showing how they relate to contemporary philosophical conceptions. This is the task of *philosophy*. Separating the two tasks enables us to make sense of the ideas

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Reflections on the Study of Chinese Thought," Tan, Sor-hoon, ed. *Bloomsbury Research Handbook on Methodology in Chinese Philosophy* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 57-74; "Studying Confucian Ethics from the Inside Out," *Dao* 15:4 (December 2016): 511-532.

of the Chinese thinkers on their own terms, minimizing the influence of contemporary and habitual modes of philosophical thinking.

But there is still a missing step. The problem is that the philological work by itself does not tell us how to make the transition to the philosophical study. It provides us with a body of ideas that can appear alien to us, presented through conceptual apparatus radically different from ours. If we frame these ideas in terms of contemporary philosophical conceptions, we again distort the perspectives of these thinkers. What we need is a way to truly understand the significance of their ideas, and present it in ordinary plain language. There is the additional task of moving *from philology to philosophy*.

For this purpose, we need to find common ground between their perspectives and ours. Chinese thinkers are deeply ethical in their concerns, and their ideas reflect their own ethical experiences. To grasp the significance of their ideas, we need to understand their ideas in relation to their ethical experiences, and then relate these ideas to our own experiences that are akin to theirs. The common ground lies with certain human experiences of significance that are shared across cultures and times.

This consideration suggests a *three-step* approach. First, we engage in philological study to approximate the perspectives of the Chinese thinkers, extracting their ideas from the relevant texts through careful study of the language and analysis of texts, and taking into account the historical context. Next, we look to their life experiences, identifying those that transcend the local and the temporal and that are reflected in some of their ideas, in an attempt to understand their perspectives on certain fundamental human experiences that are shared across cultures and times. In presenting their perspectives, we use ordinary plain language to the extent possible, avoiding or at least minimizing the use of terms carrying contemporary philosophical presuppositions. Finally, we relate these ideas to contemporary philosophical discourse by setting their perspectives on these human experiences alongside contemporary philosophical perspectives, or by highlighting for further philosophical exploration the kinds of human experiences examination of which has been relatively peripheral to contemporary philosophical agendas. While we might make reference to contemporary philosophical agendas and conceptual frameworks at this point, we still avoid framing the perspectives of Chinese thinkers in these terms. By proceeding in this manner, we ensure maximal continuity between their perspectives and the philosophical work we undertake with their ideas.

On this approach, it is important to ground our philosophical study of Chinese thought in careful philological work, and to take into account the actual concerns and experiences of the Chinese thinkers. For this reason, before moving on to a more philosophical discussion of the Confucian idea of 'no self', I will provide brief comments on historical background. I will comment on Confucius (6^{th}-5^{th} century B.C.) and Mencius (4^{th} century B.C.), to whom I will also refer, in addition to Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming.

Confucius and Mencius lived in the Warring States period, with persistent warfare between states and political rivalries within individual states. Confucius travelled among the states, trying to convince rulers to practice an ethical ideal that emphasizes personal self-cultivation and social harmony. The rulers were not responsive, and he was often obstructed and slandered by powerful officials. After repeated failures, he turned his focus to teaching to prepare the next generation for similar efforts. Mencius saw himself as a follower of Confucius, engaged in similar endeavors, and was equally unsuccessful.

Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming lived in times when there was a single imperial government. Zhu Xi did not occupy any major office in court, but as a local official, he repeatedly petitioned the Emperor for change. Wang Yangming had a more active role in court, and once successfully crushed a rebellion. Both were outspoken against corruption and abuses of power, made enemies in court, and were slandered and persecuted. Wang even suffered the humiliation of being beaten in punishment and then exiled.

These thinkers developed their ideas on the basis of this kind of life experiences. What unites them is a shared ethical and political ideal, referred to as the 'Way', and a sense of mission to spread the Way. This involves personally embodying the ethical ideal, active political involvement to put it into practice, and teaching students to do the same. Their concerns are primarily practical, unlike present day academics. Their ethical reflection takes place in the context of their providing ethical guidance to their students and addressing ethical issues they themselves confront in their daily social and political engagement. Except for Zhu Xi who wrote more extensively, their ideas are recoded mostly in collections of their sayings and, for the later Confucians, also short writings including essays, letters, epitaphs, memorials, etc. Their mode of ethical reflection has a predominantly practical orientation, quite different from what is familiar to us from contemporary philosophical discourse.

In our discussion, we will take into account this background observation about Confucian thought. I will assume the outcomes of past philological studies, and focus on the more philosophical implications of the idea of 'no self'. I will illustrate the two dimensions of the idea – relation to others and relation to one's own psychological states – with some examples.

As a start, consider Zhu Xi's and Wang Yangming's experiences in court. They confront deep hostilities, but there is no opting out. Their only venue for reform is through the central government, unlike Confucius and Mencius who could travel to another state. For them, the question is how to cope with the persistent personal injuries that they have to endure. They would respond with anger, and the question is: what form should this anger take? In discussing the way they address this question, we will focus on situations similar in nature to those that they themselves confronted, namely, personal injuries in public life. We are ourselves familiar with similar experiences in contemporary life, whether in the workplace or in other kinds of social interactions. Our discussion will not extend to injuries in close personal relationships, such as betrayal by an unfaithful spouse or a close friend, nor to atrocities such as genocide. These are not the kind of situations to which they are responding, and the way to address the question about anger might well differ for these other kinds of situations.

3. Anger[9]

Consider a situation in which an offender has wrongfully injured a victim, the two not being closely related. If the victim is a stranger, I might respond with anger at the situation because I care about the ethical norms that have been violated, and perhaps also because I care about the victim as a fellow human. I might be moved to intervene, or take corrective steps.

If the victim is related to me in a special way, say a friend, I might respond with greater emotional intensity because I care about the victim in a special way. I might also feel a greater urgency and special obligation to intervene. This is a

[9] In my discussion, I draw on two past papers: "Resentment and Forgiveness in Confucian Thought," *Journal of East-West Thought* 4:4 (December 2014): 13-35; "On Anger – An Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology," Jones, David & He, Jinli, eds., *Returning to Zhu Xi: Emerging Patterns within the Supreme Polarity* (State University of New York Press, 2015): 299-324.

matter of differential responses due to the different relations the victim stands to me, something that the Confucians, and we ourselves, would endorse.

If the victim is me myself, I might, for the same reason, respond with greater emotional intensity, and feel a greater urgency to defend myself. To the extent that my response is not different in nature from the previous two scenarios, this is again a matter of differential responses. My attention is still focused primarily on the problematic situation, and on the proper way to respond. As in the other two scenarios, I take a condemning attitude toward the behavior of the offender, and am moved to correct the situation.

But my response when I myself am the victim might take a different form. When personally injured, a common human tendency is to focus on ourselves as victims. I place a special significance on the way I myself am treated by others, and I regard wrongful injury of myself as a personal challenge, affecting my standing as a person. My attention is focused on the offender as someone who poses this challenge. I take a combative attitude toward the offender, and am moved to counter this personal challenge.

In this way, my anger in response to personal injury can take two different forms. In the first case, my attention is focused primarily on the situation and on how to properly respond to the situation. My anger is directed at the situation; I am *angry at what he has done*. In the second case, my attention is focused on the offender as someone who has personally challenged me, and on how to counter this challenge. My anger is directed at the offender; I am *angry at him* for having done this to *me*.

This distinction is familiar to us from our own experiences, at least earlier in life if not currently. When we are aware of wrongful injury, such as malicious slander of someone or other acts of injustice, we are angry at what the offender has done and take a condemning attitude toward his behavior. Our response intensifies if the victim is more closely related to us, but if the victim happens to be ourselves, the nature of our response changes. If is as if we have ‘zoomed in’ to the situation, looking combatively at the offender through the eyes of the victim, intent on countering the personal challenge that he has posed. Moving in the reverse direction, we might initially respond in this combative manner when we have been personally and publicly insulted. But we might come to realize, perhaps with help from a friend, that the offender habitually treats others in this manner, and might even come to observe him behaving similarly to others in other contexts. Our perspective alters, and we become more removed from his initial insulting act, as if

we have 'zoomed out' of the situation. We no longer view this particular insulting act of his as carrying any special personal significance, going beyond its being part of his habitual pattern of inconsiderate behavior, which we still condemn.

In either kind of response, I am aware that it is I myself who has been wrongfully injured. But this fact is seen as just one aspect of his wrongful behavior in the one case, and as carrying a special personal significance in the other. Zhu Xi, commenting on a distinction by Mencius between a higher and a lower form of courage, describes the two forms of anger as anger that 'pertains to morality' and anger that 'pertains to the physical body':

"The lower form of courage involves anger that pertains to the physical body, while the higher form of courage involves anger that pertains to morality."[10]

He regards the former as a higher form of anger, and this view is representative of the Confucian position in general.

The Confucians are explicit that our sense of honor and disgrace should not be a matter of how we are treated by others. Instead, it should be a matter of our ethical qualities, including our own ethical conduct. When confronting wrongful injury, what is of primary importance is to respond to the ethically problematic situation in a way that is ethically appropriate, and my attention should be focused on the situation as a whole and on how to appropriately respond to the situation. In so responding, I would be responding with anger that 'pertains to morality'. My attention should not be focused on the offender and on how to counter the personal challenged posed by the offender. To respond in this other way is to be concerned about myself in a way that goes beyond a concern with the ethical quality of the situation; this is to respond with the form of anger that 'pertains to the physical body'. To reflect this difference, and in the context of commenting on Confucius' positive remark about the anger of his most talented student Yan Hui, Zhu Xi also describes the first form of anger as 'residing in things', namely, the situations that one confronts, and the second as 'residing in oneself':

"Yan Hui's anger resides in things and not in the self… (The mind) is like a mirror reflecting things … it just follows things and responds …"[11]

We will discuss his comparison of the mind to a mirror in section 5.

[10] *Commentary on the Mencius* (*Mengzi Jizhu*) (Sikuquanshu edition): 1.18b.
[11] *Commentary on the Analects*: 3.10b.

Some additional observations are in order in relation to the Confucian view of anger. First, in steering us away from the more personally involved form of anger, it does so not by inviting us to view what transpired as just the outcome of some impersonal causal chain of events, rather than the outcome of the intentional action of some culpable agent.[12] Instead, it invites us to shift our perspective so that our attention is redirected away from a specific focus on the offender, and toward the situation as a whole and its ethical aspects, including both what makes the situation ethically problematic and how we might appropriately respond to it. In so redirecting attention, the nature of our anger becomes transformed rather than being eliminated.

Second, this view of anger assumes a substantive ethical conception, a conception by reference to which both the situation and one's response to the situation are assessed. But it does not depend on the specific content of such a conception, and so should be intelligible in relation to other traditions that work with substantive ethical conceptions different from that of the Confucians. Such conceptions can even include observations about how wrongful injury violates certain entitlements of the victim or contains an implicit 'insulting' message that the victim is not deserving of better treatment.[13] The crucial difference between the two forms of anger is not between the content of different substantive ethical conceptions, but between different ways in which an ethical conception figures in the victim's perspective. The victim might acknowledge that the wrongful injury violates her entitlements and contains an implicit 'insulting' message, in a manner similar to the way she would make the same observation if the victim were a stranger. It is as if the acknowledgement that she herself is the victim is an after-thought: "the wrongful injury implicitly conveys that the victim is not deserving of better treatment, and that victim happens to be me". Alternatively, this acknowledgement that she herself is the victim might take on a special personal significance for her, so that this violation of her entitlements and the corresponding 'insulting' message are experienced by her and inform her perspective differently. To use the earlier metaphor, it is as if she has 'zoomed in' to the situation, looking combatively at the offender through the eyes of the victim.

Third, the difference between the two forms of anger obviously admits of degrees – it is not as if one's anger in response to wrongful injury takes either one form or the other. One can be more or less personally involved in or removed from

[12] This other way of viewing anger is often regarded as an implication of the Buddhist denial of the reality of a 'self' that is the enduring subject of a series of psychological states.

[13] Here, I make reference to a theme found in the contemporary literature; for references, see my "On Anger – An Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology."

the situation. This point is familiar to us from our own experiences as we advance in life – the move away from the more personally involved form of anger is a gradual progression that comes with experience and broadened exposure. This point is arguably true of all the ethical attributes idealized in Confucian thought, including the state of 'no self' and the exemplary figure of the sage – they serve primarily to indicate certain idealized directions of self-transformation in which one gradually progresses.

Fourth, in making their proposal, the Confucians do not deny that human beings do tend to assign special significance to themselves and to respond with the more personally involved form of anger. Their view of what is truly disgraceful is directed exactly against this tendency to view what is disgraceful in terms of how one is treated by others. Their view of anger is a normative proposal, and they do take into account known facts about the human psychology.

Fifth, as a normative proposal, this view of anger does not conflict with certain specific views about childhood development. It is compatible with the view that the more personally involved form of anger arises earlier in childhood, or that it might play an important role in the learning of ethical judgements or in transitioning to the less personally involved form of anger. Even if childhood development involves one's moving from being angry at an offender on one's own behalf, to being angry at an offender on behalf of another, and then to being angry at the offending behavior as such (along with the corresponding ethical judgment), this does not speak against the normative proposal that, for mature adults, anger should take on this other form.

As mentioned earlier, the difference between the two forms of anger has to do with the significance that one assigns to the fact that oneself is the victim. This fact is something that one acknowledges in both cases, but in one case but not the other, this fact is emphasized by assigning it a significance that goes beyond its being just a feature of an ethically problematic situation. That is, one assigns it a significance that one would not if someone else were the victim. This is to have an emphatic self, that is, to take up a viewpoint from which one carries a special significance that one does not assign to others.

In connection with wrongful injury, this viewpoint derives from a tendency to overemphasize ourselves, by assigning a special significance to the way we are treated by others. The Confucian view on anger is directed against this tendency. But the special significance we assign to ourselves can also derive from a tendency to underemphasize others, by not assigning them a significance comparable to that

we assign to ourselves. This happens when we are not sufficiently sensitive to harm to others. The Confucian idea of one body is directed against this tendency.

4. One Body[14]

For this discussion, I will assume the notion of well-being of humans, and refer to as harm an occurrence that is detrimental to someone's well-being. Our focus is the Confucian position on how to respond to harm to others. In the literature, the Confucian position is often presented in terms of contemporary philosophical conceptions. For example, consider this remark by Mencius.

"No human is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others… Suppose a person were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion."[15]

Some have argued that the response described by Mencius is one of sympathy, understood in terms of a third person perspective on the imminent harm to the child and our being moved by a positive regard for the child.

Or consider the Confucian idea that we should form one body with all things. For example, Wang Yangming speaks of all things being part of his body, in that he views the pain of others in a way comparable to pain in his own body.

"At bottom, Heaven, Earth and all things are my body. Is there any suffering or bitterness of the great masses that is not disease or pain in my own body?"[16]

Some have argued that this idea of one body should be understood in terms of empathy, understood in the sense of having feelings and emotions congruent with those of the other.

Analysis of the language points to a different understanding of the Confucian position. In the remark by Mencius, the terms translated as "sensitive to the suffering of others" and as "compassion" refer to responses of the heart that are directed to *situations* that involve harm, and so are syntactically different from the

[14] In my discussion, I draw on a paper under revision: "Zhu Xi and the Idea of One Body".
[15] D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, revised edition (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003): 2A:6 (translation modified).
[16] *Instructions for Practical Living*: no. 179.

English expressions "sympathy" and "empathy". The responses involve a sense of alarm, pain and distress, and being unable to bear the situation. Another difference is that these terms can describe one's response to situations involving harm to *oneself*, not just harm to others. If we are to come up with English equivalents to these terms, the closest would be "being pained by" and "being unable to bear" a situation that involves harm, whether to oneself or to others.

Further historical research shows that the idea of one body is modeled on the parent-child relationship. An early text describes how parent and child are connected "like a single body divided into two":

"The way parents relate to children, and children relate to parents, is like a single body being divided into two….. That is why they have a deep connection to each other even when spatially separated, so that one would come to the relief of the other when the other is in pain or suffering, would share in the worries and longings of the other…"[17]

The emphasis is on the sense of connectedness between the two, one that derives from both the blood relation (as conveyed by the idea of a single body being divided into two) and presumably also the nurturing relationship and history of interaction (something emphasized in the Confucian view of the parent-child relation). This sense of connectedness manifests itself in the way the parent would be moved by harm to her child in an intimate and unmediated fashion, in a way comparable to her response to harm to herself. The response is *intimate* in the sense that it is a felt response and not just a matter of a concern her child's well-being that can take a more removed form, and is *unmediated* in the sense that it is not further explained by some such concern or some other psychological state of hers.

The Confucians emphasize how we would respond in this manner to harm to ourselves as well as to harm to another who stands in a close relationship to us, as in the parent-child relationship. We also respond in this manner if the harm is presented in a vivid fashion, as when we visually witness a young child about to fall into a well. This kind of experience is familiar to us, as in the way we respond to TV images of young children wriggling in pain after the nerve gas attack in Syria. In addition, they highlight this kind of response in the context of special accountability by virtue of one's official position. For example, Mencius describes

[17] *The Annals of Lu Buwei* (*Lushichunqiu*) in Xu Weiyu *Compiled Annotations on the Annals of Lu Buwei* (*Lushichunqiu Jishi*) (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1988): 9.17b.

how an official, charged with regulating the waters to prevent flooding, would look upon those who drowned from flooding as if he himself had drowned them. Another official, charged with teaching and promoting agriculture, would look upon those who died from starvation as if he himself had starved them.

"Yu regarded those who drowned from flooding as if he himself had drowned them. Ji regarded those who starved from shortage of food as if he himself had starved them."[18]

A contemporary example is the pain a school principal would feel when she learns that dozens of her students have been buried alive in an earthquake. Another example is the way we expect a leader of a country to feel for the plight of her people affected by some disaster involving significant injuries and loss of life. In fact, in the history of China, the ideal official is often described as one who feels for the people under her care as a parent would feel for her children.

But we can become indifferent in the absence of these special considerations. We might be indifferent to harm to total strangers apparently unrelated to us. We might be indifferent to famine victims in faraway lands, until we see graphic images of their plight on TV. And we might be indifferent to efforts at environmental conservation because we do not see ourselves as accountable to future generations. What the ideal of one body advocates is that we *sensitize our heart* to mitigate the various factors that might limit the scope of its sensitivity. This is something we do nowadays in the education of children, as when we bring them to a developing country to have more direct contact with a life of deprivation. Ideally, we should respond with similar intimacy to situations involving harm to any, taking into account the differential responses due to different relations.

When a parent becomes aware of serious harm to her child, she responds in the same way she would to comparable harm to herself. From her perspective, she and her child are not distinct in any sense going beyond the ordinary distinction between individuals. She sees herself and her child as connected – it is as if they are "a single body being divided into two". This idea of connectedness is fundamental to the idea of one body, which advocates that we expand the sensitivity of the heart so that we view all other humans as similarly connected to ourselves. This point is conveyed in an early Confucian text by saying that the sage views the whole human community as a single family.

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[18] *Mencius* 4B:29.

"The sage views all under Heaven as a single family, and the whole kingdom as a single person."[19]

What the Confucian idea of one body advocates is that one gradually expands the sensitivity of one's heart and thereby also expands the scope of one's sense of connectedness to others. The idea highlights a direction of progression that one is supposed to work on continuously, without denying the reality of the distinction between oneself and others. It is not derived from a view about the non-reality of the 'self', or about how all humans are ultimately one on some 'metaphysical' level despite being distinct in appearance.[20] Rather, the idea derives from what might be described as a profound sense of humanity, a sense of mission to work for the betterment of the human community, as reflected in the lives of the four Confucians whose background we sketched in section 2. Later Confucians, who are mostly scholar-officials, and aspiring scholar-officials earlier in life, explicitly describe themselves as having as their mission 'all under Heaven', or the whole human community as they know it. This profound sense of humanity is portrayed in this remark by an 11th century Confucian, who also presents the idea of one body in terms of the expanding sensitivity of the heart:

"If one enlarges one's heart, one can make all things in the world part of one's body. … The sage can relate to the world in such a way that not a single thing is not part of himself."[21]

In the case of wrongful injury, it is the tendency to ascribe special significance to the way we are treated by others that generates an emphatic self. The remedy is to transform ourselves so that we respond to wrongful injury to ourselves in a way comparable to our response to wrongful injury to others. By contrast, in the case of our response to harm, it is the tendency to ascribe insufficient significance to harm to others due to these limiting factors that generates an emphatic self. The remedy is to sensitize our heart so that we can respond to harm to others in a way comparable to our response to harm to ourselves. These two examples illustrate the first dimension of the idea of 'no self', which concerns the way one relates to others. I now turn to the second dimension, which concerns the way one relates to one's own psychological states.

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[19] *Record of Rites* (*Liji*) (Sibubeiyao edition): 7.7a.

[20] The former view is often associated with Buddhism, and the latter view can be found in Arthur Schopenhauer's *The Basis of Morality*, trans. Arthur Brodrick Bullock, 2nd ed. (Dover, 2005), especially Part III (Chapter V) & Part IV (Chapter II).

[21] Zhang Zai (1020-1077) *Awakening the Dim and Obscure* (*Zhengmeng*) in *Complete Works of Zhang Zai* (*Zhangziquanshu*) (Sibubeiyao edition): 2.21a.

5. Detachment[22]

To begin, let us consider the way Zhu Xi describes, in four steps, how the emphatic self, or what he calls the self-centered self, arises.[23] Starting with some innocent desires, likes and dislikes, we magnify their significance by having thoughts of putting in special efforts to bring about or prevent certain situations. We then form anticipation of the outcomes with fixated attention. When the outcomes go in accordance with or against our wishes, we do not just respond emotionally to them, but also dwell on the responses and on the outcomes. This leads to the emergence of what he calls the self-centered self. This in turn leads us to further magnify the significance of the initial desire, and the whole process repeats over time, further solidifying the self-centered self.

This kind of phenomenon is familiar to us. For example, we tend to be pleased at being well-regarded by others. But I might magnify the significance of this by having thoughts of deliberately making a favorable impression at an upcoming presentation. As I attend the event, I am moved to speak in a certain manner to impress. I form the anticipation of making a favorable impression, and my attention becomes fixated on it as I eagerly look for signs of a positive response. I might even subtly induce colleagues to talk about my performance. I not only feel pleased if I succeed and displeased if not, but I dwell on these responses. In Zhu Xi's word, these responses stay in my mind as if I cannot digest them. They then feed into the formation of a prideful self, a conception of myself as superior and deserving of attention. As such a self emerges, it generates other thoughts that further magnifies my sense of importance. I might, for example, have thoughts of criticizing others for the purpose of displaying my supposed superiority.

This process accounts for what Wang Yangming refers to as "attachment" in the remark cited earlier. Through this process, I have become attached to the pleasure of being well-regarded, and also to the praise and recognition, in the sense

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[22] In my discussion, I draw on three past papers: "Purity, Moral Trials, and Equanimity," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, New Series 40:2 (June 2010): 245-264; "On Reflective Equanimity: A Confucian Perspective," Li, Chenyang & Ni, Peimin, eds., *Moral Cultivation and Confucian Character: Engaging Joel J. Kupperman* (State University of New York Press, 2014): 127-149; "*Le* in the *Analects*," Goldin, Paul R., ed., *A Concise Companion to Confucius* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017): 133-147.

[23] Zhu Xi gives this account in the context of commenting on *Analects* 9.4 – see *Commentary on the Analects* 5.1b-2a; *Questions and Answers on the Analects* 14.2b-3b.

that my attention constantly shifts back to it. In so responding, I have injected myself into my responses, and by doing so, my mind is also pulled along by my responses. I not only respond with disappointment if my presentation is not well received; my attention repeatedly shifts back to that experience, and my mind becomes disturbed.

This presentation of the example relies on a conception of what is appropriate, and what exceeds what is appropriate, in the way we view praise and recognition by others. The Confucian idea of self-centeredness in general assumes some such conception. Self-centeredness is not a matter of cravings that result from a false view of how what we ordinarily regard as our own desires and emotions genuinely belong to an enduring subject that constitutes the 'I'.[24] Instead, the Confucians work with a substantive ethical conception by reference to which we can distinguish between what is appropriate and what is not in the way we view our relation to other humans and to the world. To go beyond what is appropriate as assessed in relation to this conception is to have injected ourselves into our own psychological states in a way that constitutes self-centeredness or attachment.

We can further illustrate the distinction between attachment and detachment with the Confucian view of anger which, as we noted earlier, also assumes a substantive ethical conception. In responding to wrongful injury to ourselves, we should focus on the ethically problematic situation and on how to respond appropriately to the situation. While it is appropriate to dislike being mistreated, I might magnify its significance and regard the way I am treated by others as tied to my sense of honor and disgrace. As a result, when wrongfully injured, I focus on the wrongful injury as a personal challenge, injecting myself into my view of things. According to Zhu Xi, this intrusion of the emphatic self is like dust that gathers on a mirror, adversely affecting my response. Ideally, the mind should be like a clear mirror. Its response of anger should focus on the situation, not on myself. The anger should take a form made appropriate by the situation, in the way that the image in a clear mirror accurately reflects the object. This explains his comparison of the mind to a mirror in the remark cited earlier:

"Yan Hui's anger resides in things and not in the self… (The mind) is like a mirror reflecting things … it just follows things and responds …"

The metaphor of clear mirror has another implication. If I take wrongful injury personally, there is a tendency for my anger to persist even after the situation has

[24] This other conception is often associated with Buddhism.

been corrected. I might still bear a grudge. But if my anger is directed at the situation, it dissipates without residue after the situation has been corrected:

"(The sages) are angry when they should, and (their anger) hits the mark. But when the affair is over, (their anger) dissipates and there is no residue."[25]

Furthermore, just as the image in a mirror is called forth by the object, my anger is called forth by the situation. Although the anger is still mine in an ordinary sense, it is not my anger in that I have not injected myself into it. In this sense, again in Zhu Xi's words, "the sage does not have anger."[26]

Another effect of viewing wrongful injury as a personal challenge is that my mind becomes agitated. It is as if I have lost control over the workings of my mind, so that it is pulled along by what happens to me. By contrast, if my anger is focused on the situation, the mind will, in Wang Yangming's words, "stay broad and unperturbed":

"If one can flow along with and respond to things as they come … even when we are angry, our minds can stay broad and unperturbed."[27]

Zhu Xi also uses the metaphor of still water to highlight this last point:

"The mind of the sage is like a puddle of still water. When it confronts a situation, there is just the reflection of the situation, and so what it emits is always in the proper measure."[28]

Still water can act as a clear mirror, but the metaphor makes the additional point that the mind is free from disturbance.

These comments on anger illustrate the crucial element in the idea of detachment. Working with a substantive ethical conception, one does not inject oneself into the response of anger in the sense of not adding anything that might detract from what is ethically appropriate in one's response. In this sense, the anger is called forth by and just an accurate reflection of the situation. Although it is one's anger in an ordinary sense, it is not one's anger in the sense of being due to oneself. The remark by Wang Yangming cited earlier generalizes the point to our responses to situations in general:

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[25] Zhu Xi *Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi Yulei*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986): 2445.
[26] *Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu*: 776.
[27] *Instructions for Practical Living*: no. 235.
[28] *Topically Arranged Conversations of Master Zhu*: 2770.

"(The mind) is like a clear mirror … It reflects things as they come, without retaining any residue. This is what is meant by the saying that 'the sage's emotions follow the ten thousand affairs and he has no emotions (of his own).'"

When in this state of detachment, it is as if the mind operates at two levels. There are the first-order, more immediate, responses to our environment, including emotional responses of all kinds. At the same time, the mind maintains a more enduring second-order posture in which it stays anchored, calm and unperturbed in the midst of these responses, monitoring and regulating one's responses, not allowing them to be influenced by tendencies that ascribe an undue significance to oneself.

While we have characterized the idea of detachment in relation to an ethical conception that the Confucians uphold, the idea does not depend on the substantive content of that conception. As in the earlier example of a problematic form of pride, all it depends on is some sense of the distinction between appropriate responses to situations and what goes beyond what is appropriate. As another example, consider a student who is totally devastated by her failure to get admitted into medical school, something toward which she has worked diligently. To the extent we judge that her response goes beyond what is appropriate, we might describe her as being too 'attached' to this aspiration of hers. As parent or teacher, we might highlight to her other possibilities, other career paths for which she has talent and in which she also has interest, so that she can be more 'detached' from that specific aspiration and her current situation. In addition to illustrating how the distinction between attachment and detachment is relative to our sense of what is appropriate, this example also shows how the difference is a matter of degrees – the student's transition to a more detached perspective can be a matter of gradual progression.

This example concerns another area of human experiences that we are familiar with – our responses to failure, loss, and hardship. Confucius and Mencius highlight a certain way of responding to such situations, one which I will refer to as an attitude (in response to a specific situation) or a posture (as a general outlook) of *acceptance*. I will discuss acceptance as another illustration of the idea of detachment.

6. Acceptance[29]

The comments by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming on anger reflect their experiences with repeated personal injuries as they sought reform through the central government. By contrast, Confucius and Mencius had the option of leaving a state in face of obstruction, and moving to another in hope of better success. For them, the question is how to confront the persistent failure of their efforts, as well as the deprivation and personal loss they faced. They use the term *ming*, often translated as "fate" or "destiny", to refer to adverse conditions of life that one cannot change. These can be things that we literally cannot change, such as death from starvation when no food is available. They can be things that we normatively cannot change, such as death from starvation when the only way of obtaining food is by killing someone. Using the term, they convey an attitude of acceptance in response to such conditions.

Just like anger in response to personal injury, acceptance has to do with the manner in which our attention is directed. In acceptance, we still acknowledge the genuine loss, and respond with sorrow or frustration. But we do not fixate attention on the loss and emotional suffering, and instead direct attention proactively to other matters of importance. For example, Confucius comments on how, in face of material deprivation, one should focus attention on the Way – which includes one's own ethical cultivation and dedication to public service – rather than poverty.[30] And when not appreciated by others, one should focus attention on developing in oneself those qualities that make oneself worthy of appreciation, instead of being concerned with the lack of recognition.[31] When confronting hardship or persistent failure, it is tempting to translate the sense of loss into a sense of injustice. As a result, one becomes bitter and resentful. Acceptance also involves being free from this tendency. For example, Confucius comments on the importance of not taking offence when not appreciated by others.[32] Confronting persistent failure in his own political endeavors, he comments on how he himself would not put the blame on others, nor feel resentful against the world at large.[33]

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[29] In my discussion, I draw on my past paper "On Reflective Equanimity: A Confucian Perspective," as well as "*Ming* and Acceptance," forthcoming in Xiao, Yang ed. *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Mencius* (Springer).

[30] D.C. Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects*, revised edition (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002): 15.32

[31] *Confucius: The Analects*: 4.14; cf. 15.19.

[32] *Confucius: The Analects*: 1.1.

[33] *Confucius: The Analects*: 14.35.

Of the losses in life, the most difficult to accept is one's own death. To see what accepting death involves, let us consider two extreme scenarios involving a scientist. After years of dedicated work, she is just a year away from discovering a cure for a so-far incurable disease. But, to her shock, she is herself diagnosed with some terminal illness, and has only a month left. What she regards as important in her scientific endeavors affects how she directs her attention and responds to her imminent death.

She herself might figure in a prominent way. What carries primary importance is not the scientific discovery as such nor the human benefits it brings, but herself making the discovery, along with the resulting honor and recognition. From such a perspective, her attention will be fixated on her imminent death. She bitterly questions why this should happen to her, with a sense of being unfairly deprived of a place in history. She is overwhelmed by her emotions and is unable to do anything constructive with her remaining time. In the extreme case, she might even resort to destroying records of her research, so that no one can 'steal' her accomplishment.

By contrast, what is of primary importance might be the scientific breakthrough and its benefits to the human community as such. She is still pleased by any honor it brings, and is still deeply saddened that she cannot see her research to its conclusion. She does see her death as a genuine loss, and feels its psychological impact. But her attention is not fixated on herself, and she maintains a distance from her loss and suffering to proactively respond to the situation. She would gather her associates and pass on the progress she has made, so that the research can be concluded after her death. She would spend time with family, and make amendments to anyone whom she believes she has not treated well.

The two scientists share similar responses natural to humans, such as pleasure at being recognized and sorrow at one's own imminent death. Unlike the first who is more personally involved, the second stands some distance from her own psychological states and the situation she confronts. The difference is not just a matter of the lesser intensity of her emotional responses, but her overall perspective and her place in this perspective. She is able to stay anchored and unperturbed in the midst of her loss and suffering, not feel resentful about her loss, and direct her attention to other matters of importance to her. She does so against the background of a perspective in which she herself does not carry an overriding significance.

These two scenarios are just two extremes between which there is a spectrum of possibilities. While there might be different views on where to draw a line between what is appropriate and what is not in the way one responds to adversities in life including one's own death, we do draw some such line. Against that background, we can speak of one's accepting or not accepting, or coming to accept after initially being unable to accept, the adversities in life. This attitude of acceptance provides another illustration of the state of detachment.

This discussion of acceptance bears obvious similarity to the discussion of the idealized form of anger. In both cases, the transition, whether from a more personally involved form of anger to the idealized form, or from a less accepting to a more accepting attitude, is a matter of gradual progression. The progression involves a shift of attention away from being narrowly focused on the way one figures in the situation, to a broader perspective that includes other matters of no less, and perhaps greater, importance. Indeed, the idealized form of anger is like acceptance in that it is itself a response to a specific kind of adversity in life. Conversely, the opposite of acceptance involves a resentful attitude toward the adversity, seen as not just a loss but an injustice, and the resentful attitude is itself a personally involved form of anger. One difference, though, is that while acceptance involves directing attention away from an adverse situation (which one cannot alter, literally or normatively) to other matters of importance, the idealized form of anger often involves active efforts to address the situation to which it is a response, through intervention or other forms of corrective action.

Whether we can accept an adversity, including our own death, when it arises depends on what we regard as important in our lives. So, the idea of acceptance concerns not just an attitude that we take up when confronting adversities in life, but also a more enduring posture or outlook in life that prepares us to accept such adversities. This is also true of the idealized form of anger – our ability to so respond when confronting wrongful injury derives from a more enduring outlook on ourselves and our own significance in relation to others. Acceptance as an outlook needs to be cultivated over time, and Confucius presents this outlook in terms of "understanding *ming*", a characteristic of the morally superior person and something that Confucius himself only attains by the age of fifty.[34]

Commenting on this outlook, Mencius speaks of cultivating oneself to await the adversities of life, so that one can stand firm on one's purpose even in face of death:

[34] *Confucius: The Analects*: 20.3, 2.4.

"….. Whether he is going to die young or to live to a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. To cultivate oneself to await it (viz. *ming*), this is the way to stand firm on *ming*."[35]

Here, awaiting *ming* includes awaiting one's own death, which involves the awareness that death can come at any time – it is not just death, but its timing, that is outside our control. Mencius also speaks of flowing along with and accepting proper *ming*:

"*Ming* resides everywhere, and one should flow along with and accept proper *ming*. This is why one who understands *ming* does not stand under a wall on the verge of collapse. Dying after having done one's best in following the Way is proper *ming*. Dying in fetters is not proper *ming*."[36]

Here, the expression "flowing along with and accepting" is a fairly literal translation of an expression with the connotation of receiving something – an adversity that cannot be altered, literally or normative – without struggling against it. The idea that we should accept only proper *ming* has a broader significance. The posture of acceptance also involves our ensuring with vigilance that we do not incur adversities through our own negligence or misconduct. And in preparing for our own eventual death, we should ensure that we live a life of such a kind that, when death finally comes and at any time it comes, we will have nothing to regret upon looking back.

7. 'No Self' – An Ethical Outlook[37]

Having discussed acceptance as another illustration of the state of detachment, let us return to the idea of 'no self'. There are other aspects of the idea that we have not discussed, but I will make just one final observation.

I just described acceptance as an *outlook* in life. The term "outlook" emphasizes the fact that acceptance involves a way of looking at adversities in life and one's relation to them. The same can be said of the idealized form of anger. It involves looking at injury to oneself in a way that does not carry any special

[35] *Mencius* 7A:1 (translation modified).
[36] *Mencius*: 7A:2 (translation modified).
[37] In this discussion, I draw on my paper "Zhu Xi and the Idea of One Body."

significance compared to injury to others. This point is true of the state of ‘no self’ in general. It is fundamentally a way of looking at the world and one’s place in it, in short, an *ethical outlook*.

As an ethical outlook, the state of ‘no self’ is not primarily a matter of beliefs, though it might involve certain beliefs. Consider someone who comes to accept her death after initially struggling against it. She does so not by coming to know more about her situation, but through viewing what she already knows in a different light. She comes to see what pertains specifically to herself – loss of life, failure to bring years of dedicated work to final fruition, not being able to gain the recognition she hoped for, etc. – in a broader perspective that includes other matters of no less, and perhaps greater, importance. In her conversion to this other way of looking at things, her beliefs will have changed, such as her beliefs about what is important and what she needs to do with her remaining time. But this change is part of what is involved in her coming to accept her death, and does not explain the conversion. She could have acquired similar beliefs through discussion with friends, but still not see things in the relevant way and not accept her death. There are steps she can take to facilitate the change, such as making mental effort to direct attention away from herself to other affected parties, including family and the patients whose life depends on the cure. But ultimately, if her outlook does change, the change is something that comes to her rather than something that she brings about at will, even if she could take steps to facilitate its coming. For this reason, the Confucians describe the ideal state of the mind using a perceptual term. The term can be translated as “brightness” or “clarity” – it describes the brightness of the sun and moon, as well as the eyes’ clarity of sight. When transitioning to this state, and from the perspective of someone in this state, one has come to see things clearly; things have come to be illuminated.

Not everything we have said about the state of ‘no self’ is part of the perspective that someone in this state has by virtue of being in this state. That person need not view her own state in terms of the account we have presented, and even if she does, it is not by virtue of her having such an account that she is in that state. This point is explicitly highlighted by Zhu Xi, who distinguishes between two perspectives on the state of ‘no self’. Putting his distinction in our terms, we may say that the *internal* perspective is the perspective that someone in that state has by virtue of being in that state. The *external* perspective is the perspective that an observer takes up in describing her state. Not everything we say about her state from the external perspective need be part of her internal perspective. This point is familiar to us – not everything in our description of the virtuous person need be part of her own self-description.

So, a further distinction can be drawn within our description from the external perspective. We might describe that state without reference to how things look from the viewpoint of someone in that state. Or we might describe how someone in that state experiences and views things from the internal perspective. Only the second kind of description is a comment on the content of the ethical outlook involved in the state of 'no self', namely, the way things look to someone by virtue of being in that state. A prominent aspect of the content of her outlook may be described as a sense of union, or coming together as one, with other humans and things. That sentiment has two dimensions, disappearance of oneself and incorporating others into oneself. They can be illustrated respectively with the example of anger and the idea of one body.

Consider someone responding with the idealized form of anger. She acknowledges a situation in which she has been wrongfully injured. But she sees it as not different in nature from a situation in which someone else has been similarly injured. She recognizes that the response of anger comes from her. But she sees it as not different in nature from her response to someone else being injured, or the response of someone else to her being injured. Speaking from our perspective but commenting on her perspective, there is a sense in which she has let go of herself. As ordinary human beings, we, and she prior to her transformation, tend to ascribe a special significance to ourselves. In terms of this conception of an emphatic self, it appears as if she herself has disappeared from her view.[38] Still working with the ordinary distinction between herself and others, she is aware of her involvement in the world including her interactions with others. But without seeing herself as standing out in any way that carries a special significance, she is in a sense taking on a spectator-like posture on herself.

But she is at the same time fully engaged. The idea of one body idealizes a state in which one sees oneself as fundamentally connected to others. The sentiment is modeled on that of a parent who sees her child as connected to her, "like a single body being divided into two". Commenting from our perspective on the perspective of someone in this state, it is as if she has incorporated others into herself through this sense of connectedness – as put by the 11th century Confucian thinker cited earlier, she has, by "enlarging her heart", made "all things in the world part of her body". But this sense of connectedness comes with an active engagement with the world. It involves one's working for the betterment of the

[38] This sentiment is conveyed by Confucian thinkers in terms of 'forgetting' oneself, where "forgetting" is a translation of a character with the meaning of no longer focusing on, or losing attentive awareness of, oneself.

human community with a kind of dedication similar to the parent-child relation. This is the profound sense of humanity referred to earlier, one that characterizes the major representative Confucian thinkers. Thus, her spectator-like posture is also set in the context of this full and genuine engagement. These two dimensions – the disappearance of oneself and the incorporation of others into oneself – describe the two complementary aspects of the sense of union that is part of the content of her ethical outlook.

8. Conclusion: Methodological Observations

The above discussion provides only a general sketch of ideas related to the Confucian idea of 'no self'. It is intended to convey an overview of some distinctive features of Confucian ethics, and also to illustrate the methodological point I made earlier. In section 2, I proposed an approach to the philosophical study of Confucian thought that involves a move from philology to philosophy. We do not start by asking how it addresses familiar philosophical questions, or by trying to fit its ideas into familiar philosophical categories. Instead, we start from within the tradition, closely studying the language and the texts, and taking into account the historical contexts. Having extracted the ideas through philological studies, we attend to the life experiences that the ideas reflect, experiences that transcend the local and the temporal and that we can resonate with. Only then do we engage in further reflective work with these ideas, moving outward from the tradition, and bringing these ideas in contact with contemporary philosophical discourse.

There are other approaches that suit other purposes. The philological starting point is not needed if our goal is primarily to promote interest in the tradition, or to gain some stimulation for our own philosophical reflections. But it will be crucial if the goal is to understand the tradition on its own terms, and to ensure that our philosophical reflections on that tradition are maximally continuous with the tradition itself. What I have presented is a sketch of some conclusions that result from this approach. On this approach, the way to build the linkage between Confucian thought and contemporary philosophical discourse is to look to our own contemporary experiences akin to those of the Confucian thinkers that are reflected in their ideas and that transcend the local and the temporal. For this reason, I have used contemporary examples to illustrate these Confucian ideas. Also, to minimize the influence of contemporary philosophical conceptions on our understanding of the Confucian perspective, we avoid or at least minimize the use of contemporary

philosophical conceptions in our presentation of their ideas. For this reason, I have used ordinary plain language to the extent possible in presenting the Confucian perspective.

There are apparent similarities between these Confucian ideas and contemporary philosophical conceptions. For example, it might appear that the Confucian distinction between two forms of anger parallels the contemporary distinction between the first personal and third personal forms of anger, or between resentment and indignation. And it might appear that what is proposed is that we respond only with the third personal form of anger even when we ourselves are the victims. But if we take this direction, it would appear that the Confucian idea of one body actually advocates a reverse move. It idealizes our sensitizing our heart to respond to situations involving harm to others in the way we would to situations involving comparable harm to ourselves. In doing so, it would appear that the idea of one body advocates our responding to situations involving harm to others from a first person perspective, as if it were harm to ourselves.

To avoid saying that the Confucian position advocates a third personal form of response in one case and a first personal form of response in the other, one might suggest that what it advocates is that we *transcend* the distinction in both cases. After all, the contemporary distinction assumes some distinction of significance between the two perspectives; it assumes that my response to a situation in which I am affected differs in some significant way from my response to a situation in which someone else is similarly affected. The Confucian idea of 'no self', by contrast, opposes any distinction of significance between myself and others, going beyond differential responses. So, one might present it by saying that it advocates our transcending the distinction between first and third person by dissolving the first person perspective in one case and the third person perspective in the other.

We might, if we wish, describe the Confucian position in this manner, taking the contemporary distinction to be the same as the kind of distinction to which the Confucian idea of 'no self' is opposed. But doing so does not add anything to our understanding of the Confucian position or of its philosophical implications. Furthermore, this does not appear to be the way the contemporary distinction is understood in the literature. For example, the transition to the idealized form of anger or the "enlargement of the heart" that the Confucians idealized is a gradual progression that one is supposed to work on over one's life time. By contrast, the

contemporary distinction between first and third person is not usually understood as a matter of degrees, with one merging gradually into the other.

The general point is that framing Confucian ideas in terms of contemporary philosophical conceptions will likely distort the Confucian perspective if these conceptions are understood in some more specific sense, and will likely not contribute to our understanding of the Confucian perspective and its philosophical implications if understood in a very general sense. As another example, consider the attempt to frame the Confucian idea of one body in terms of the contemporary notion of empathy, which is used in different ways by philosophers and psychologists. On the one hand, the Confucian idea is different from the phenomena associated with the more specific uses of the notion. The idea is conceptualized in a way very different from such phenomena as having feelings and emotions congruent with those of the other, or imaginatively projecting oneself into the perspective of the other, whether for cognitive or experiential purposes, and whether in a self-directed (what oneself would experience) or other-directed (what the other might be experiencing) manner. As we saw in section 4, the kind of response highlighted in the Confucian idea is directed to a situation involving harm, whether to oneself or to another, involving one's being alarmed and pained by, and being unable to bear, a situation. The response *in itself* does not involve, though it does not rule out, any exercise in imaginative projection or one's having mental states congruent with those of the other. On the other hand, the notion of empathic concern can be understood broadly, such as to refer to any "other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need."[39] But framing the Confucian idea of one body in terms of empathy broadly construed in this manner does not add anything to our understanding of the Confucian position or of its philosophical implications. Instead, it hides from view the distinctive feature of the Confucian idea, namely, extending to others the kind of intimate and unmediated responses to situations involving harm to oneself or to one's immediate family members.

To the extent that the study of another ethical tradition serves to facilitate our stepping back from habitual modes of thinking by highlighting alternative perspectives on fundamental human experiences, it is important that we do not let our habitual modes of thinking shape our understanding of the other tradition. Instead, we need to start from within the tradition, closely studying the language

[39] See C. Daniel Batson *Altruism in Humans* (Oxford University Press, 2010): 11. In chapter 1, Batson provides a helpful overview of the range of phenomena often associated with the more specific uses of the term "empathy".

and texts, and taking into account the historical context. What I hope to have shown in this discussion is that, without looking at Confucian thought through the lens of our familiar philosophical agendas and conceptual frameworks, there can still be interesting points of contact with contemporary philosophical discourse. The common ground has to do with human experiences of significance that transcend the local and the temporal. How to respond to wrongful injury, and how to cope with loss and deprivation, are concerns that we also share. The special sensitivity to harm that comes with close relationships or special accountability are phenomena familiar to us. Highlighting the Confucian perspectives on these concerns and phenomena helps bring to light alternative perspectives on familiar subject matters, such as anger and compassion. It also helps bring into focus subject matters not currently at the center of contemporary philosophical agendas, such as acceptance and detachment, or the idea of an ethical outlook.