

INTRODUCTION

Many thinkers across divergent philosophical and religious traditions bemoan a seemingly precipitous decline in moral standards. Often, the corrupt and ethically moribund world that they inhabit is compared unfavorably to a golden age, when ethics enjoyed its rightful place at the apex of human existence and human beings were able to live in harmonious concord, rather than being ravaged by warfare and conflict. It is no coincidence that our imagination is fed by the fantasy of a perfect moral world, located in the distant past. If we did not saddle ourselves with the responsibility of making our own humanity, questions of a moral nature would not preoccupy us. Due to our capacities for speech, thought, and emotion, which allow us to reflect upon and also distance ourselves from our immediate environs, our place in the world cannot be taken for granted. Morality is an integral part of the process of making a place for ourselves in this world, and we rely on tales of moral perfection to ensure that our efforts do not cease. The irony which not only underlies but drives our moral being is that we would not be moral creatures if our position in the cosmos were secure, but that we rely on dreams of moral fulfillment for our efforts at moral development to continue.

Cultural diversity renders impossible a single definition of ethics. According to some Western approaches, ethics is considered to be universal in scope, and basic principles of humanity are assumed to cut across linguistic and cultural divides. However, the simple equating of Western thought with legal formalism is too facile because it ignores the subtlety of the impetus underlying such formalism itself. For a thinker such as Kant who perhaps epitomizes formalism, the possibility of uni-

versality acts as the “impossible possibility” that catalyzes human beings to embark on a quest of constant moral self-making. We ought to act as though our actions could be universalized (*FMM* 254),¹ all the while recognizing that they never will be universalized. The pursuit of truly “universal” maxims to orient our conduct is ceaseless.

Confucian thinkers do not base ethics on abstract principles, which they associate with a rigid legalism, but rather claim that virtue is a process of harmonizing relationships between individuals, taking into account the cultural milieu in which one is situated. This implies that what may be considered ethical in one community may be unethical in another. Furthermore, ethics does not simply offer guidance to individuals on how to act, but is also part of the process of community formation. Individuals who are situated differently within the social order may have different ethical responsibilities. This does not preclude a notion of a common humanity. Someone who is practiced in the art of being virtuous has developed the capacity to extend herself to include others, which would serve her well, even in communities of strangers. Harmony rather than universalism is the goal and while this is in some ways more flexible, it can also bring with it a conservatism that demands respect for existing social orders and conventions. It is no coincidence that Confucian philosophy demonstrates a penchant for hierarchy and deference.

Despite the changing nature of the ethical terrain across and within different cultural traditions, it does seem to be closely associated with what it means to be a human being, as a member of a larger community, as well as within the world of nature and within the cosmos as a whole. Negotiating these interrelationships is no easy task. Some ethical approaches, such as that of Kant, insist that ethics separates human beings from the natural world and that the human community is explicitly defined against nature (*CPrR* 29).² Other thinkers, such as Mencius, hold that social integration cannot be separated from the process of integration into nature. Ethics is concerned with *making* oneself part of a larger

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Kant Selections*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988).

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

whole. It is a difficult undertaking because we can never take our place in the world for granted. We are saddled with the tremendous responsibility of learning to become what we are, and to make ourselves belong in a world that we already inhabit.

In Kantian thought, much emphasis is placed on making ethical decisions. This may be symptomatic of a common bifurcation between being and becoming, which sees the self as the agent who acts. In contrast, in Confucian philosophy the emphasis is on becoming an ethical person. Who I am and what I do cannot be neatly separated. Instead of placing the emphasis on making the ethical decision, more weight is placed on becoming the ethical person. Ethics is an art, and it requires practice and learning in order to acquire its skills. The hope is that ethical actions would eventually flow naturally from one's personality.

In the Confucian tradition, ethics often seeps into areas that would not often fall within the ethical domain for a thinker such as Kant, such as ritual, art, and music. Because ethics is seen as a means of participating in the harmonizing tendencies of the cosmos, rather than a matter of making the right choices, art and ritual contribute to the cultivation of harmony. The ethical project is unending because it demands a continuous extension of the self to include others and thus necessitates ongoing self-transformation. According to more formalist ways of thinking, there is often a discomfort with movement, and ethics attempts to anchor itself to principles unblemished by the ravages of time and history which can serve as guiding beacons for our activity. Thus, Kant implores us to act *as though* our maxims could become universal law. Heteronomy and change are the circumstances that ethics must overcome. Even a thinker such as Rousseau, who acknowledges that ethics is part of an ongoing process of community formation, insists that we should orient ourselves according to the relatively static and blissful equilibrium that, he alleges, defined our existence in the state of nature (DOI 42).³

Ethics is acknowledged to be a difficult undertaking in both Chinese and Western traditions, largely due to the selfish tendencies of human

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. Peter Gay (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

beings. Selfishness undermines ethics, and ethical norms are intended to counteract its influence. Confucian philosophers such as Mencius, who maintain that ethics is rooted in the natural “sprouts” of the human being, admit that careful cultivation is necessary in order to bring our ethical potential to fruition (*M Ch 2A6*).⁴ Learning how to be moral while inhabiting a society that often subverts our attempts is an important part of Mencius’s project. Selfishness is often generated in times of social disarray when the territorial impulse to draw boundaries around the self will be exacerbated. While selfishness or egoism is a tendency to expand the “self” by means of possession, exclusion, and dominance, ethics hopes to cultivate a broadening of horizons that includes others. Egoism and ethics therefore appear to be at loggerheads.

And yet, what is less often explicitly acknowledged is that egoism and ethics are also bedfellows, albeit uneasy ones. Ethics is indelibly linked to the quest for identity and finding a place to stand in the social, natural, and cosmic order. It is this quest for identity and place that can unleash the spiral of egoism. Egoism springs from the fact that we covet social recognition in order to carve out an “identity” for ourselves. Others always mirror reified aspects of my “self” back to me, and I may reject and/or embrace this reflection, but nonetheless, it will cause me to relate to myself “externally.” In other words, I am able to turn myself into the object of my own making because I am always also relating to myself through others. Often we will try to cultivate personalities in reaction to or in accordance with an external image of ourselves. Because dissonance within the self between our experiences and others’ judgments of us is common, we can become obsessed with the notion of identity to the extent that it unleashes a desire to possess oneself and others, in a misguided effort to attain unity for oneself and in the world around one. Egoism is a social and not a private phenomenon. We begin to exhibit the need to appropriate things, and other people, in order to achieve some kind of false unity. Yet, this notion of a complete self is a fiction and thus our need is seldom satiated. Egoism spirals out of control as we grasp for a self that is not to be had. A Daoist philosopher

⁴ Mencius, *The Works of Mencius*, in *The Chinese Classics* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1998).

such as Zhuangzi is acutely aware of this potential, since he insists that the best way to be one's self is to forget oneself. His text abounds with stories of individuals who are not perturbed by dramatic changes that befall them, such as the man who has a willow tree sprout out of his arm and simply shrugs it off as part of the transformation of things (*Zh* 18:151).⁵ This demonstrates an attitude that sees the self not as something to be had, but rather as a process to be nurtured with others.

For many philosophers, ethics comprises the highest essence of our humanity. It is no coincidence that the cardinal virtue in Confucian philosophy is *ren* 仁 (human-heartedness, benevolence) and is not only homophonous with *ren* 人 (human being), but also contains this radical within it. When we accuse someone of being "inhuman," we more often than not imply that she has acted unethically. Ethics is not merely about treating others well, for it also reflects the need to mark a place for ourselves in the human order as well as in the cosmos. Ethics is part of the process of our identity-making, and this dynamic also threatens to subvert it from within. The ethical judgment of others can spur the desire for improvement, but it can also unleash an unsettling insecurity. As individuals, we want to function well in our communities so we will feel as though we *belong* to it or hold a place in it. Furthermore, as members of those communities, we also seek an identity *for* the community. By setting up the parameters by means of which individuals find belonging, and also by situating the human community within the context of other communities and the cosmos at large, ethics ensures that it is inextricably linked to our images of ourselves. This is the Achilles heel that can nudge it into the unsavory domain of the unethical.

Furthermore, our image of who we are is also indelibly intertwined with what we are *not*. Because of this, ethics can precipitate a process of moralizing which looks to exclude in order to be able to laud ourselves as ethical beings. Ethics cannot truly root out the unethical, for it also feasts on it. It is too simplistic to claim that self-righteous moralizing is a deviant offshoot of morality; it is only a more sinister embodiment of its dynamic. By no means is this a reason for rejecting ethics altogether,

⁵ Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang-tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer (London: Vintage, 1968).

but it does imply that ethics must be continuously placed under scrutiny in order to remain cognizant of the potentially unethical strains that percolate beneath the surface.

The dependence of ethics on what it militates against becomes obvious even in Kant, who tries to distance ethical behavior from the dynamic of recognition. The desire for public approval is hardly an ethical motivation in his eyes. And yet, he recognizes that the need for belonging cannot simply be ignored and therefore brings in a God (whose existence he does not affirm) to suggest that morality, harmony, and happiness will eventually coincide (*CPtR* 137). It is God, not another human being, who stamps ethics with tacit approval. In other words, Kant reluctantly concedes that if we remain unconvinced that ethical conduct will be recognized and can provide a “home” for us in the future, it is hard to muster the motivation to practice morality. Yet, Kant’s unease in introducing God to buttress morality is expressed by his insistence that God is not a condition for morality, but merely its *postulate*. That is to say, God offers a hypothetical possibility, and may or may not exist. We ought not to act morally because we expect divine recompense, but nonetheless God hovers over the horizon as a nebulous yet bright future in order to instill us with hope.

Despite Kant’s hopes for perpetual harmony, his morality still feeds on an enemy, and his chosen combatant is nature, both in what he refers to as its heteronomous or unpredictable form and as the arbiter of inexorable physical laws to which human beings must submit. Moral decisions are to be made on one’s own, removed from natural desires and also oblivious to the gaze of others (*FMM* 278). The highest human expression of freedom is the ability to create the laws to which one willingly succumbs. These decisions must even be free from the interference of others, in order to fiercely guard the autonomy of the self. Although Kant does his best to try to shield the self from selfish, *particular* interests, individual autonomy becomes paramount, in order to preserve a sphere of decision-making that one can call one’s own, apart from others and nature. Morality becomes an exercise in individual freedom, which for Kant is the most important aspect of our individual and human identity. Furthermore, he makes it very clear that this freedom is exercised against nature.

Other thinkers see nature in a more favorable light, and use it to try to offset the dangers of social convention. Mencius looks to nature to ground ethics, and extricate ourselves from a situation of moral stagnation and decay. Both Mencius and Confucius recognize the danger of simply taking one's cues from others, but they do not dispense with the practice of invoking role models, insisting that one must be careful to choose the *right* people to emulate. Rousseau spurns the idea of looking to role models and instead turns to nature as a substratum that can provide an ethical foundation in times of ethical disarray. However, while Mencius sees nature as already imbued with meaning and sees no conflict between the natural and social world, Rousseau maintains that ethics is necessary because we have departed from the natural equilibrium of the prehuman and presocial animal. The lost harmony of our ancestors awakens in us the need for morality in order to re-create this state at a social level. It thus provides us with a catalyst for ethical activity but also reveals the inadequacy of any moral system, because the alleged natural equilibrium can never be recaptured. That which enables us to be moral also continuously throws our morality into question. For Rousseau, ethics always rests on an uneasy foundation but this tension is also what makes it productive and allows for it to become the expression of human freedom.

Despite the powerful hold that ethics exercises over us, its laudable nature is by no means taken for granted by all. There are dissident voices within both the Chinese and Western traditions that question the unsailable authority that ethics has enjoyed. Because morality is related to questions of belonging, and because it charts out a place for itself in relation to that which is deemed either immoral or amoral, it can also foster a desire to seek and root out its enemies. A preoccupation with highlighting the immoral nature of others becomes a means of resting on our own laurels, assured of our own goodness. Political rhetoric is all too often invoked in order to brand forces of evil in the world, thereby assuaging us by convincing us that all is well with *us*. Instead of worrying about our own ethical comportment, we become well-practiced in the art of ferreting out the unethical nature of others. For this reason, Confucius insists that we must recognize that we always have further to

go in the ethical domain (A 9:19).⁶ We can never rest content that we have arrived. If unchecked, ethical judgment not only runs roughshod over the particular, but can precipitate a witch hunt. Ethics, in other words, can surreptitiously metamorphize into the unethical.

Because of the connection between ethics and its opposite, some religious and philosophical traditions, such as Daoism, celebrate a time when ethics was not necessary. However, it is important to recognize that their antipathy to ethics does not stem from a position according to which “anything goes” in a meaningless and chaotic universe. Rather, these thinkers have ethical concerns about ethics. For Daoists, the fact that we need to think about either rules of conduct or appropriate forms of behavior is already indicative of a downfall from a harmonious existence when ethics was not yet necessary. Thus, the good is not only irrevocably connected to the bad, but may in fact foster it, because ethics can only work by a process of exclusion, which divides the acceptable from the unacceptable. Furthermore, norms of behavior only need to be established when human beings become incapable of accommodating differences. Focusing on Confucian virtues, the *Daodejing* 道德經 recognizes that striving for these virtues often masks the pursuit of public recognition, which is why it holds up the model of a sage who tries to remain invisible (see *DDJ* Ci: 49).⁷ Ethical proclamations breed hypocrisy. In an ideal world, we would not need ethics, and the “ten thousand things” would flourish in their diverse splendor, not in spite of but through their differences. Each being would provide an opening for another, rather than trying to mold others into an appropriate shape.

Nietzsche is a Western thinker who is even more radical in his condemnation of ethics. For him, ethics is symptomatic of beings that are addicted to knowledge to the extent that we assiduously try to render ourselves and the world amenable to comprehension. This is the epitome of human arrogance, because we attempt to reconfigure the world in *our image* as human beings, as we become desperate to see nothing but our own reflection wherever we go. This means that we also seethe

⁶ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

⁷ *Daodejing* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1995).

with resentment against the natural world, which does not so willingly offer itself up to the tentacles of knowledge, and we try to sever our connection to nature. Ethics for Nietzsche is about assimilation. Brutality and violence often underlie the ethical quest as we make ourselves and others into creatures that can be known. Human beings pit themselves against the natural world that they inhabit and that also inhabits them, trying to extirpate passions and desire. In turning against nature in this way, we also direct this fury against ourselves. For Nietzsche, ethics always has a violent underbelly and unleashes a spiral of a consumptive knowledge that swallows everything in its wake. The true challenge is learning to remain open to beings and things that do not resemble oneself and to sounds which are unfamiliar. He does not deny that this will result in conflict as well as friendship, but confrontation with difference is less hypocritical than forcibly blotting it out. The zealous guarding of homogeneous boundaries suffocates unique and particular individuals, since we depend upon “foreign” influences in order to engage in the process of self-becoming that is so important to Nietzsche. In one sense, the challenge that he offers is not altogether different from that of Daoist thinkers, because he advocates a movement beyond good and evil that allows us to affirm existence in its entirety rather than seething with resentment, because the world as it is is not as it should be. Yet, at the same time, there is no denying that Nietzsche is obsessed with fostering the endless creativity of self-making. According to Nietzsche, we need the radically other, both as jousting partner and as lover, to become and create ourselves. In this sense, there is a latent danger in his philosophy that the obsession with individual creativity can encourage an openness to others for the sake of oneself, and thus result in a return to the very egoism that he hopes to go beyond.

Kierkegaard also worries about the uniformity that ethics can promote. Nothing is more reprehensible to him than the judgmental bourgeois citizen, pompously satisfied that he has achieved the correct family structure, owns the right amount of property, and holds a respectable career (*EO II*).⁸

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part II*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

Others who do not imitate this prototype are simply scorned. It is no coincidence that the character Wilhelm, who exemplifies this in Kierkegaard's work, is indeed a judge. Kierkegaard highlights the position of the stranger who cannot so easily be accommodated into existing ethical frameworks. For him, religious faith in God, who is truly radically other, is necessary if we are to be able to embrace the unknown and unfamiliar. The difficult nature of this task is revealed by his insistence that it requires a leap of faith, and a plunge into the unknown. Only God, makes possible the kind of love that is not based on possession, but rather a love of the particular for its own sake. Nothing irks Kierkegaard more than the universalizing tendencies of ethics, which abstracts from difference. This does not mean that Kierkegaard rejects ethics outright, for he recognizes that it satisfies a very human need to live in a comfortable abode, but faith is required to periodically shake us out of our slumber, and prevent our ethical decision-making from simply degenerating into ethical judgmentalism.

Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard do not simply hope to overturn or dismiss ethics. Their efforts to expose its darker face also aim to resuscitate it by engendering a genuine openness to other beings. They point out that the real challenge inheres not in spurning the other, which is easily done, but in embracing him. Nonetheless, the question of creating a unique self-identity is central to both philosophers, and the other is still perceived as other to the self. Even the language of "otherness" defines the "other" in relation to the "self" and thus alludes to the self's centrality. This is why Daoist thinkers take a step that even Kierkegaard and Nietzsche would be hesitant to take. Zhuangzi advocates a forgetting of the self, encouraging us to abandon the quest for identity of any kind, for this is the best way to care for the self (*Zh* 6:58). Instead of looking in the mirror in order to elicit the praise of others, sages offer themselves up as mirrors in order to allow others to become what they are. The sage also changes as a result of the transformation of others. The mirror is not a symbol of perpetual self-reflection and narcissism, but rather of mutual transformation. It takes on a different hue depending on whom it encounters. The ideal ruler in the *Daodejing* is invisible and thus not held up as a figure to be emulated. Instead, he or she is ad-

ept at teasing out the unique characteristics of others without giving the impression of doing anything at all. Zhuangzi's sage on the other hand, goes even further, and usually repudiates politics. The position of ruler already promotes a hierarchy with which Zhuangzi is uncomfortable. His stories are replete with individuals who hold no official positions and cling to no identity. Many of them are social outcasts and thus freed from the shackles of moral convention. Because they are unconstrained by traditional roles, they attract others toward them, allowing for many to flourish in their nonassertive presence. They become leaders, precisely because they neither instruct nor judge. Confucian ethics is viewed with the kind of cynicism that Nietzsche directs at Christian morality, namely as a form of social and political control. Instead, Zhuangzi advocates interrelationships which are not based on preexisting notions of how a person should be, but rather seek out ways of engaging with others in a spontaneous and open manner. If the preoccupation with self-identity is abandoned, then ethical guidelines would become obsolete. Benevolence and justice would not be extolled but would happen spontaneously. This is a tall order indeed, but for Daoist thinkers, it is the only hope for the flourishing of the ten-thousand things.

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In this book, I engage with thinkers from Chinese and Western philosophical traditions who uphold the sanctity of ethics, as well as examining those who maintain that ethics rests on a fundamentally unethical foundation. Instead of conducting a survey of ethical approaches in China and the West, I build a dialogue between Western and Chinese thinkers in order to forefront some of the assumptions that underlie the respective traditions. The first part of my book explores approaches from Chinese and Western traditions that insist on the primacy of ethics. The second part explores thinkers who question the status that ethics enjoys, exposing its sinister aspects, and advocating the need to go beyond ethics.

Chapter One looks into the thoughts of Kant and Confucius, since both are thinkers for whom ethics is the primary concern. While Kant insists that we imagine a world that transcends nature wherein the pu-

urity of form prevails, Confucius remarks that ethics is a particularly human way of integrating into the world. Both thinkers impute to human beings a special place within the cosmos, insisting that human beings are owed dignity and respect by virtue of being human. However, Kant assumes that each individual represents humanity as a whole, while for Confucius, developing our interconnectedness is the principal activity of humanization. For both, morality is always in process and it is rather difficult to live up to our human potential.

Chapter Two compares the thought of Mencius with that of Rousseau, because they both maintain that harmonization with nature is an essential part of cultivating virtue. However, they view our relationship with nature very differently. Rousseau maintains that the process of socialization is necessarily indicative of a departure from nature and that human beings in the state of nature were naturally asocial. Morality becomes a culturally mediated attempt to imitate the harmony within the state of nature at the social level. The process is fraught with tension, because the state of nature is beyond our grasp. Mencius, on the other hand, attributes to human beings a natural sociality that must be properly nourished in order to grow to fruition. Through judgment and reasoning, we are able to extend this natural sociality to those who are more removed from us. Like Rousseau, he is worried about the effects of convention divorced from its natural roots; for Mencius, morality is an extension of the natural process, while for Rousseau, it is necessary because we have departed from nature.

Chapter Three begins the second part of the book by examining works by Kierkegaard and Daoists. Both are critical of the universalist bent of ethics, suggesting that it is closely connected to the conventional pursuit of knowledge. Kierkegaard sees faith as the movement beyond ethics that allows us to affirm the particular, but God is needed to wrest us from the ego-self in order to open ourselves to the radical alterity of the other. In Daoist thought, the need to celebrate the *de* 德 of unique virtues of the ten-thousand things is extolled. The sage does not need to have recourse to morality because he is able to provide the opening that allows the *de* of others to be expressed. It is significant that Kierkegaard's thought demands an external God, in the face of whom we are made

acutely aware of our finitude to wrest us from the ego-self, for this indicates that we are very much riveted to the self we have to let go. There is no radical other in Daoist thinking because there is no preoccupation with self-identity which is prevalent in Kierkegaard's writings.

Chapter Four juxtaposes Nietzschean and Daoist pleas to go beyond good and evil. Morality promotes the kind of egoism that allows human beings to exercise dominion over nature, silencing the multiplicity of the cosmos. Language and the reification of the concept are the means by which morality operates, hindering a genuinely spontaneous interaction with the environment and situating the human being at the center of all existence. According to both Daoist thinkers and Nietzsche, the process of labeling something good necessitates exclusion of the bad. Good is always constructed against evil, so it depends upon the very dynamic it purports to destroy. Nietzsche and Daoist thinkers share the need to affirm life in all its diversity. However, there is also a marked difference between these modes of thinking. The Daoist sage is blissfully unconcerned with his or her identity and thus is able to wander through life, undergoing constant transformations that would make most people tremble. Meanwhile, Nietzsche indicates that we will always be drawn to the bounded, but that we must periodically collapse our bounded nature in order to relish in the unbounded. Thus, we are concerned with preserving the self, but we must alternate between protecting it and letting go of the constraints of individuation.

In the concluding chapter, I argue that even the most vociferous critics of ethics do not advocate its complete abandonment. Instead, I maintain that they encourage us to recognize its limits, and the unethical tendencies it might inadvertently foster. Because ethics is often part of a process in which we try to build what Kierkegaard refers to as a "comfortable abode," it can easily transform from a process of continuous cultivation to a desire for the acquisition of "ethical properties" which are recognized by others. Critics of ethics want us to be aware of the dangers of this dynamic, which is why they suggest we must venture beyond ethics to keep it vibrant.