

Practical Philosophy West and East

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Abstract

This article offers a broad-ranging comparison of practical philosophy in the West and in China with a view to enabling not only better mutual understanding between the two sides but also better *self*-understanding on each side. Contrary to widespread Western conceptions that Chinese practical philosophy may have contributed some important principles in first-order morality but has contributed little in the area of meta-ethics as compared to the West, it is argued here that Chinese practical philosophy did indeed make important contributions in first-order morality, but that in addition it is generally superior to Western practical philosophy in the area of meta-ethics. There are, however, certain exceptions to this rule on both sides. In the end, therefore, a comparison of the two traditions can contribute not only to a better mutual understanding, but also to a better self-understanding and improvement on each side.

Keywords

morality – meta-ethics – the West – China – Plato – Kant – Utilitarianism – Confucius – Mencius – Mo Zi

Comparisons between two traditions can sometimes be illuminating for both sides, enabling each of them to understand the other better. That is certainly one of the goals of this article. But its main goal is somewhat different and more ambitious. Nietzsche points out in *The Gay Science*

that if one wants to get a clear view of one's own town, it helps to go outside it and see it from a distance, and that something similar is true of one's own *moral* environment too. This article is mainly an attempt to do the sort of thing that Nietzsche had in mind. Specifically, it is an attempt to stand at a certain distance from the Western tradition in practical philosophy by looking at it from the vantage point of the Chinese tradition (and to some extent also conversely). My hope is that doing this may contribute towards a better self-understanding, self-assessment, and perhaps even self-development on the part of Western practical philosophy (and to a certain extent on the part of Chinese practical philosophy as well).¹

There is a fairly widespread impression among practical philosophers in the West that while the Chinese tradition of practical philosophy (or “wisdom” or “thought,” as it has sometimes been called in the West, often with a hint of condescension) has certainly achieved some notable insights in

1 The closest thing to this sort of project of which I am aware is François Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, reprinted in his *La pensée chinoise dans le miroir de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 2007). I admire, have learned from, and shall at points cite this work. However, Jullien's focus on both the Western and the Chinese side is considerably narrower than the one I take here, indeed on the Chinese side restricted to Mencius alone. And I also find Jullien's guiding idea that the strengths of Mencius' position lie in his identification of the kindly sentiment of humanity (*ren*) as the foundation of morality and in a certain distinctive metaphysics of individual and world that underpins that identification problematic. So the account that I give here will be rather different from Jullien's in the end.

first-order morality, it has been much less impressive in meta-ethics, especially as compared with Western practical philosophy. The impression tends to be that in comparison with the theoretical glories of our Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, John Stuart Mill, or Rawls, the meta-ethics of Chinese philosophy is pretty thin gruel. I would like in this paper to challenge that picture – to suggest that not only has the Chinese tradition indeed achieved impressive positions in first-order morality, but in addition its meta-ethics has generally been superior to that of the West. Less ambitious and extravagant perhaps, but superior.

1 First-Order Morality West and East

Let us begin with the less controversial part of the picture that I am advocating here, the part concerning *first-order morality*.

From a fairly early period onwards, much of Western practical philosophy has been heavily committed to a certain rather specific and attractive set of moral values. The following are three central examples: First, after Plato in *Republic*, book 5 had explicitly championed a sort of moral xenophobia that left Greeks from other Greek city-states than the Athenian agent's own with only limited moral protections and barbarians with none at all, the (Cynics and) Stoics from the late 4th century BCE onwards rejected that position by introducing a new principle of *cosmopolitanism*, i.e. roughly a new principle that *all* people have a moral entitlement to decent treatment by an agent. And since then a version of this principle has become widely accepted in the West not only by philosophers but also by the Christian religion, thereby ensuring it a firm anchorage in our culture. Second, in place of an earlier Greek moral rule of thumb discussed, though not defended, by Plato in the *Republic*, according to which one should benefit friends and harm enemies, the New Testament introduced the new moral rule of thumb widely known as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And since then this

has again become widely accepted in the West in one version or another, not only by the Christian religion itself but also by much practical philosophy. For example, Kant's "categorical imperative," according to which one should only act on maxims that can survive the thought-experiment of their universalization, can be seen as a sophisticated variant of the Golden Rule. Third, after Homeric culture had positively valorized such traits in the individual as fame, political power, martial prowess, exacting revenge, wealth, and successful lying/deception (think of Homer's heroes Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, for example), the Greek tragedians of the 5th century BCE, Socrates, Plato, and then the New Testament championed a contrary set of values: shunning fame, not seeking political power, refraining from violence, forgoing revenge, disregarding wealth, and not lying or deceiving. And since this new tradition arose in the West, not only the Christian religion but also much practical philosophy has accepted these new values.

Now, concerning first-order morality, the most striking thing about Chinese practical philosophy is that it developed almost exactly the same set of first-order principles, only even earlier. Thus, first, when Confucius in the 6th–5th centuries BCE, followed by his most important successor Mencius in the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, developed the principle of "humanity [*ren*]," and Mo Zi in the 5th century BCE developed his similar but even more radical principle of universal love, they all did so in the same spirit as Western cosmopolitanism.²

² See e.g. *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, ed./trans. Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 41, 80–81, 214. Confucius explicitly remarks that an agent should continue to act well even when among barbarians (*ibid.*, 41, cf. 36; also Confucius, *The Analects*, ed./trans. Annping Chin [New York: Penguin, 2014], 250); Mencius likewise explicitly includes *all* humans among the beneficiaries of the humanity that he insists one should exercise (*Source Book*, 81); and Mo Zi likewise explicitly includes the whole world of human beings among the beneficiaries of the universal love on which he insists (*ibid.*, 214). Incidentally, an interesting modern synthesis and radicalization of these Confucian and Moist

Second, as is well known, Confucius also already explicitly formulates versions of the Golden Rule. For example, in *The Analects* he says, “Do not impose on others what you do not desire for yourself.”³ His follower Mencius then continues to philosophize in the same spirit (for example, when he advises rulers to secure for their subjects the same goods as they want themselves).⁴ And Mo Zi commits to a version of the Golden Rule as well.⁵ Third and finally, the specific moral values of shunning fame, not seeking political power, avoiding violence, forgoing revenge, disregarding wealth, and not lying or deceiving are all broadly shared by Confucius, Mencius, Mo Zi, and their followers (and to some extent by the leading Daoist philosophers Laozi [6th century BCE] and Zhuangzi [4th–3rd centuries BCE] as well).

In short, the Chinese tradition in practical philosophy is strikingly similar to, and every bit as attractive as, the Western tradition in respect of first-order morality, differing from it mainly just in enjoying the advantage of chronological priority.⁶

principles can be found in the 19th-century Confucian philosopher K'ang Yu-Wei (ibid., 723–736).

3 Confucius, *The Analects*, 179, cf. 259; also *Source Book*, 28, 31.

4 *The Works of Mencius*, ed./trans. James Legge (New York: Dover, 1970), 151–153.

5 Mo Zi, *The Book of Master Mo*, ed./trans. Ian Johnston (London: Penguin, 2013), 82.

6 Of course, there are also some exceptions to the general rule of the attractiveness of the Chinese tradition's first-order morality. For example, we are likely to disagree strongly with Confucius' high estimation of autocratic political authority and with his low estimation of women. But the Chinese tradition was not monolithic (e.g. Mencius was much less authoritarian than Confucius, indeed even inclined towards certain democratic ideas). Moreover, unsavory exceptions are at least as common and severe in the Western ethical tradition (e.g. Aristotle's views about slaves, barbarians, and women, or Nietzsche's views about slaves, the weak, women, and Jews). Above all, to overemphasize such exceptions in either the Chinese or the Western case at the expense of the more appealing shared features mentioned above would be to miss a rather attractive forest for some ugly trees.

2 Meta-Ethics West and East

However, it seems to me that in the area of *meta-ethics* (broadly construed), the Chinese tradition in practical philosophy is not only as attractive as, but on the whole superior to, the Western.

Admittedly, on some issues there is not a big difference between the two traditions: one is struck more by similarities, albeit with the Chinese tradition again enjoying a certain chronological priority. For example, both traditions have from an early period taken a lively interest in the question of whether human nature is at bottom morally good, morally bad, morally indifferent, in certain cases morally good but in others morally bad, or what not. And both traditions have developed a wide range of incompatible answers to this question, some thinkers arguing for the first answer, morally good (e.g. Rousseau in the West, Mencius [4th–3rd centuries BCE] in China), others for the second answer, morally bad (e.g. Hobbes in the West, Xunzi [3rd century BCE] in China), yet others for the third answer, morally indifferent (e.g. Hegel in the West,⁷ Gaozi [4th century BCE] in China), and still others for the fourth answer, namely in some cases morally good but in others morally bad (e.g. Plato and Aristotle in the West, certain theorists discussed though not named by Mencius [4th–3rd centuries BCE] in China).⁸

However, for the most part the two traditions diverge quite sharply in the area of meta-ethics, and much to the advantage of the Chinese tradition over the Western. For it seems fair to say that in the area of meta-ethics, whereas the history of Western philosophy has largely been a history of mistakes – more specifically, a series of mistaken footnotes to Plato's mistakes – with only occasional rays of light relieving the darkness, the Chinese tradition has achieved just the opposite

7 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, par. 396, Zusatz.

8 Mencius' work is an especially rich source for this debate in ancient China. See *The Works of Mencius*, 394–421; *Source Book*, 49–55. Concerning this debate, cf. François Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, Chs. 5–6, 1436–1455.

emphasis, a predominance of defensible positions over misguided ones.

Needless to say, such a verdict is based on judgments concerning the substantive meta-ethical issues involved that are going to be very controversial, and it would be futile for me to try to justify those judgments here (that would be a task for a much longer work, or series of works). But the following are eight key respects in which I take it that the mainstream of Western philosophy's meta-ethics has been deeply misguided (though it is worth mentioning that Western *literature* has often done considerably better):

(1) Whereas for Homer and his culture moral values were not essentially dependent on the gods, starting with Plato many Western practical philosophers have in one way or another tied moral values to an otherworldly source of validity, such as Plato's own transcendent forms, the God of Judeo-Christianity with His Ten Commandments, or Kant's "postulate" of God as the guarantor of the *summum bonum* of a proportioning of happiness to moral desert.

(2) Whereas Homer and his culture merely drew a distinction between (what can be very roughly translated as) actions done voluntarily (*hekôn*) vs. actions done involuntarily (*akôn*), and tended to restrict moral responsibility to the former to the exclusion of the latter, but had no notion of a "free will," or indeed even of a "will" at all, and moreover considered voluntariness and moral responsibility to be perfectly compatible with the external causal determination of actions (especially by gods),⁹ Socrates and Plato took the novel step of in effect projecting the distinction between *freedom* and *unfreedom*, which up till their time had been exclusively socio-political, inwards into individual souls (see especially Plato's *Phaedo*). The Stoics then crystallized this new conception into a contrast between the "free will" vs. the "slavish will," considering the "free will" to be

perfectly compatible with a causally deterministic universe, identical with moral goodness, and vanishingly rare. Then in the second century CE the Aristotelian philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias modified the new conception still further by drawing on Aristotle's doctrine that the sublunar realm is causally indeterministic together with Aristotle's more traditional distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions and assumption that only the voluntary ones are morally responsible, in order to generate the following three new ideas about free will: (i) that it requires that the agent could, under exactly the same circumstances as those that obtained when he acted, have acted otherwise (this in opposition to the Stoics' conception that free will was compatible with causal determinism),¹⁰ (ii) that free will is a precondition of moral responsibility (not identical with moral goodness, as the Stoics had held), and (iii) that it is something that people commonly possess (not something vanishingly rare, as the Stoics had believed). Then, finally, Christian thinkers such as Origen and Augustine took over this whole accreted package of ideas from the thinkers just mentioned, reinforced it by drawing on some roughly similar ideas from the Old Testament about a God who creates everything ex nihilo and a mankind made in His image, and subsequently popularized it for millennia.¹¹ As a result, this model became an almost unquestioned presupposition of Western practical thought, playing a central role, for example, not only in Christian writers but also in the moral philosophies of Hume and Kant. However, in the course of this development of the model in the West, the sheer contingency of its gradual construction in antiquity, the extreme weakness of the philosophical arguments that supported the construction at each stage, and the dubiousness of the deeper motives that lay behind it were all quietly

9 For an excellent account of Homeric views on these matters, see Arthur W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

10 This idea is today sometimes known as the principle of "alternate possibilities."

11 See on all this Michael N. Forster, "Towards a Genealogy of the Idea of Free Will" (forthcoming), where I draw on the work of Arthur Adkins, Myles Burnyeat, Michael Frede, and Albrecht Dihle to develop this account.

overlooked or forgotten. The preceding sketch has perhaps already given at least a sense of the contingency and the weakness of the arguments. Concerning the dubious deeper motives involved, these centrally included Socrates', Plato's, the Stoics', and the Christians' shared dissatisfaction with what they all experienced as an oppressive socio-political order and consequent attempt, in a rather transparent exercise of self-deceptive wish-fulfillment, to salvage a sort of freedom for themselves by projecting it inwards into the individual soul, while simultaneously effecting an almost equally gratifying self-deceptive stigmatization of their oppressors as inwardly mere slaves (for which additional motive, see already Plato's *Gorgias*). They also, ironically, included a certain ideological function that this whole self-deceptive illusion, as it became widespread among the oppressed masses, came to serve in the interests of the oppressors, namely the function of making the masses' oppression seem more tolerable to them and thereby deterring them from rebelling against it.¹²

(3) Again beginning with Socrates and Plato, and then continuing on through the Rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the critical Kant, many Western practical philosophers have held that moral attunement is fundamentally *cognitive* in nature, a sort of cognition either of a special sort of objective fact (e.g. Plato's eternal forms or George Edward Moore's simple, non-natural property) or of special principles of rationality (e.g. Kant's categorical imperative).

(4) Again beginning with Socrates and Plato, many Western practical philosophers have in addition assumed that moral cognition can be adequately captured in some sort of strict formula, such as a definition, that makes clear which actions are right and which wrong (or in a set of such formulas). Socratic/Platonic definitions, Kant's categorical imperative, and (in a somewhat different spirit) the Utilitarians' "greatest happiness of the greatest number" are all examples of such an assumption.

¹² See *ibid.*

(5) Accordingly, again beginning with Socrates and Plato, many Western practical philosophers have believed that moral education can in principle be achieved just by communicating the relevant formula, and that more purely causal mechanisms, such as the influence of moral exemplars (or role models) and of literature, are therefore strictly speaking inessential to moral education.

(6) Whereas early Greek culture had possessed an acute sense that there are multiple different standards of moral value, the Greek tragedians of the 5th century BCE indeed making such a multiplicity and the resulting phenomenon of moral dilemmas a central theme of their plays (e.g. Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*), beginning with Plato, many Western practical philosophers have instead believed that there is ultimately just a *single* moral standard. This tradition was evidently inaugurated by Plato himself, who in the dialogue *Protagoras* makes his character Socrates argue (by means of a series of stunningly bad arguments) for the unity of virtue, i.e. for the position that such specific virtues as "justice," "temperance," "piety," "courage," and so on all ultimately turn out to be just one and the same thing,¹³ and who as a result of holding some such position conspicuously drops the Greek tragedians' concern with the problem of moral dilemmas in his dialogues.¹⁴ But this tradition has subsequently been perpetuated by many further Western practical philosophers of otherwise very different

¹³ Beneath the notoriously weak arguments for this position that Plato develops in the dialogue, his deeper reason for it (and his deeper mistake) perhaps lay in an assumption that since moral attunement is fundamentally cognitive in character, the conflicts in moral judgments that would inevitably arise in certain cases if moral values were multiple would be *contradictions*.

¹⁴ Notice, for example, that in the *Euthyphro* when a golden opportunity arises to illustrate and address that problem – namely Euthyphro's sense of his obligation to prosecute a known murderer despite the complication that the murderer in question happens to be his own father – Plato instead of raising and addressing it makes his Socrates slide over it, apparently with an assumption that Euthyphro's decision to prosecute his own father for murder is just obviously the morally wrong decision to make.

stripes as well, including for example Kant (with his *single* criterion of the categorical imperative) and the Utilitarians (with their *single* criterion of maximizing utility).

(7) Since Socrates and Plato, many Western practical philosophers have assumed or argued that there is just a single set of moral values (whether internally plural or unitary), so that when other people *seem* to espouse alternative sets of moral values they are in reality either just making mistakes or else reflecting that single set in unclear or distorted ways. Besides Socrates and Plato themselves, the Stoics, the German Rationalists, the French Enlightenment, Hume, Kant, John Stuart Mill, and many other Western moral philosophers have all espoused versions of such a view.

(8) Since Socrates and Plato, Western practical philosophers as a group have tended to vacillate rather schizophrenically between two diametrically opposed positions: On the one hand, many of them have regarded moral value as completely independent of pragmatic considerations concerning the fulfillment of desires, whether these be individual or collective ones (Socrates and Plato are examples of this position, as is Kant). On the other hand, many others have gone to the opposite extreme of in effect reducing moral value to such pragmatic considerations, either at the level of the individual (as in Epicureanism) or at the level of the collective (as in Utilitarianism).

These, then, are eight widespread positions in Western meta-ethics that I would ultimately classify as mistakes. Now, in sharp contrast to the Western tradition of practical philosophy, the Chinese tradition has tended to avoid these eight mistakes and to champion much more defensible meta-ethical positions instead.

Thus, concerning position (1) (an otherworldly foundation for morality), Confucius scrupulously separates questions of morality from questions about a spiritual domain or religion: in *The Analects* we are told that he did not express views about the Way of Heaven;¹⁵ that he said,

15 Confucius, *The Analects*, 66.

“Devote yourself earnestly to the duties of men, and respect spiritual beings, but keep them at a distance”;¹⁶ and that he added, “It is humans who can enlarge the Way. The Way cannot enlarge humans.”¹⁷ Mencius takes a very similar position.¹⁸ Most subsequent Chinese practical philosophy has essentially followed Confucius’ and Mencius’ lead in this respect.

Concerning position (2) (free will), just like Homer in the West, Confucius and the mainstream of Chinese practical philosophy are entirely innocent of the dubious later Western conceptions that human beings not only have a “will,” but moreover a “free will,” that this “free will” is a precondition of moral responsibility, and that it is in addition incompatible with causal determinism.¹⁹

16 *Source Book*, 30.

17 Confucius, *The Analects*, 261.

18 Cf. for this Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, 1477–1480. While both Confucius and Mencius do refer to “Heaven [*tian*]” in the course of expounding their views, this does not seem to be something transcendent or personified for either of them, but instead little more than Nature.

19 Cf. Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, Chs. 10–11, 1485–1508. For a very helpful survey of Chinese views in this general vicinity, see Kai Marchal and Christian H. Wenzel, “Chinese Perspectives on Free Will,” in *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, ed. Meghan Griffith, Neil Levy, and Kevin Timpe (Oxford: Routledge, 2016). Marchal and Wenzel actually set out to try to refute the position of Jullien and others that the conceptions in question are absent from Chinese thought, but in the process they rather end up confirming it. Incidentally, in addition to the various Chinese views that they discuss as candidate approximations to those conceptions, one might also consider Mo Zi’s argument that the concept of fate should be rejected because it has anti-moral implications (*The Book of Master Mo*, 171–187). However, here again the initial appearance of a proximity to the Western conceptions turns out to be illusory rather than real on closer inspection. In particular, there is no hint here of an argument that a belief in fate is to be rejected because fate undermines morality by excluding free will. Rather, the argument is that a belief in fate undermines morality by serving as an excuse for people not to work hard to meet moral standards and thereby encouraging them to act irresponsibly.

Concerning position (3) (cognitivism), Chinese practical philosophy has for the most part instead been committed to *sentimentalism*. For example, as was mentioned, Mo Zi's central moral principle is the principle of "universal love." And while Confucius often speaks of moral "knowledge" and "learning," and this has led not only the ancient Confucian *Great Learning* but also some modern interpreters to read him as a moral cognitivist,²⁰ he too seems in reality rather to be a moral sentimentalist. For, as Chad Hansen points out, to "know" in early Chinese philosophy usually means to know *how* or to know *to* rather than to know *that*.²¹ Accordingly, while Confucius does attribute an important *supporting* role in moral life to certain forms of knowing *that*, such as a knowledge of history, everyday facts, and poetry,²² he calls this only "the next-best kind of knowledge."²³ And when he comes to explain the type of knowledge or learning that he values most, namely moral knowledge or learning, he usually does so simply in terms of a person *having a certain affective attitude* or being *motivated to act* in certain ways. For example, we read in *The Analects*: "If a person is able to appreciate moral worth..., is able to serve his parents with the utmost effort and his lord with no self-interest, and in his relationship with friends is trustworthy in words, ... I would surely call him learned"; "Work for what is appropriate and right in human relationships; show respect to the gods and spirits while keeping them at a distance – this can be called wisdom"; "When slanders that seep under your skin and grievances that cut through the

flesh do not drive you to an immediate response, you may be said to have keen perception."²⁴ In a similarly sentimentalist spirit, Confucius also says: "To know something [i.e. presumably in the lesser sense of 'know' – M.N.F.] is not as good as to have a love for it. To have a love for something is not as good as to find joy in it."²⁵ Likewise, and indeed even more clearly, Confucius' most important and influential follower Mencius holds that the basis of morality lies in feeling.²⁶ For instance, he illustrates the basis of moral commitment with the following famous example: "When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear *to see the sufferings of others*, my meaning may be illustrated thus: even nowadays, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. *They will feel so*, not as a ground on which they may gain the favor of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of neighbors and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing."²⁷ Moreover, Mencius' version of sentimentalism is strikingly sophisticated in some important respects. For one thing, in light of this and similar examples he actually distinguishes between *several different sorts* of feelings that constitute moral value:

From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man. The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety.

20 For example, JeeLoo Liu, "Confucian Moral Realism," *Asian Philosophy* 17/2 (2007), 177.

21 Chad Hansen, "Relativistic Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*" (online), 14.

22 Confucius, *The Analects*, 66, 110.

23 *Ibid.*, 110. To be a bit more precise, this passage seems to conflate such a distinction between real moral knowledge and mere knowledge *that* with the somewhat different distinction between innate moral knowledge and moral knowledge achieved through experience (Confucius claiming only to possess the latter). It is the former distinction that interests me here.

24 *Ibid.*, 5, 90–91, 182.

25 *Ibid.*, 90.

26 See *Source Book*, 54, 56, 65, 71, 80, 82; *The Works of Mencius*, 139, 201–203, 259–260, 402–403, 460.

27 *The Works of Mencius*, 202.

The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge.²⁸

For another thing, his version of moral sentimentalism implies that the feelings in question *have a cognitive component*. For, as Anne Cheng has pointed out, the word *xin* that he uses in these contexts *combines* notions of heart and intellect.²⁹ Moreover, he explicitly argues that righteousness, although it is something internal, has an external reference (and hence a cognitive component).³⁰ This sophisticated qualification still leaves his position reasonably classifiable as a form of moral sentimentalism rather than moral cognitivism, however, namely for two reasons: First, the essential role that he here accords to cognition in the moral sentiments, that of providing them with their intentional objects, is evidently one that it plays in virtually *all* sentiments (e.g. even in more everyday likings and aversions). And second, the cognition and objects in question here are of an everyday sort, not of the special sorts that the moral philosophers usually classified as cognitivists have in mind (e.g. Plato's eternal forms or Moore's simple, non-natural property). This inclusion of cognition in the moral sentiments arguably makes Mencius' version of moral sentimentalism subtler than some better known versions of such a position from the West, in particular Hume's version, which by contrast seems not to take account of the essential role that cognition plays in virtually all sentiments and in moral sentiments in particular.³¹

28 Ibid., 202–203.

29 See Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 174–175.

30 *The Works of Mencius*, 397–401.

31 This is not to say that Mencius' version of moral sentimentalism is the very best version that can be achieved, however. In particular, its following features can all be criticized: (1) Mencius (just like Hume with his "sympathy" or Rousseau with his "pity" in the West) assumes that the sentiments constitutive of a morality are bound to be *kind* ones, as it were, whereas in fact this need not always be the case; as Nietzsche pointed out, they could indeed at least in principle be just the

Concerning position (4) (the claim that morality can be adequately captured in formulas), both Daoism and Confucianism deny that this is so. For example, the first Daoist, Laozi (6th century BCE) implies such a denial with his principle that the *Dao*, or Way, is inexpressible. And an even clearer version of the same denial can be found in his Daoist successor Zhuangzi (4th–3rd centuries BCE), who writes: "It is impossible to establish any constant rule."³² Such a denial is also an important part of Confucius' position. For example, Confucius implies it when he rejects both the principle of Po-i that one should only enter office when a regime is doing well but otherwise refrain from doing so and the opposite principle of I Yin that one should enter office whether or not a regime is doing well in favor of his own approach of entering office when it is appropriate to do so and refraining from doing so when it is not;³³ when he defends the inconsistent advice that he has given to different students on different occasions

opposite, sentiments that oppose kindness as a sort of temptation or vice. (2) Relatedly, Mencius assumes that the sentiments in question are universally shared, whereas the sentiments constitutive of moralities, and hence these moralities themselves, can in fact be very various. (3) Mencius' inclusion of intentional objects and hence cognition in the moral sentiments, while very plausible, does not address certain complications that ought to be addressed. In particular, the sentiment, or affect, that motivates a moral action usually aims not only to achieve some specific external goal, e.g. *helping so-and-so*, but also to thereby *do what is right/good*. There will therefore usually be a *double* reference to the outside world and hence a *double* involvement of cognition here. (The involvement of this second sort of external reference and cognition of course applies not only to the usual standpoint of the moral agent, but also, and indeed even more obviously, to that of the moral judge.) But Mencius seems only to have the former half of this situation in view, not the latter half. I shall return to the latter half below and suggest a way in which it too can ultimately be seen as compatible with sentimentalism, namely in virtue of only involving everyday sorts of cognitions and objects, not special ones à la Plato or Moore.

32 *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 130.

33 *The Works of Mencius*, 193–194.

by referring to the different contexts involved (in particular, to the students' different characters);³⁴ and when he denies that the sage is for or against anything simpliciter.³⁵ Moreover, such a denial reappears even more explicitly in Mencius' follower Mencius, who points out, for example, that the rule that one should not touch a woman's hand meets with an exception when it comes to saving one's sister-in-law from drowning,³⁶ and who accordingly says more generally, "Holding the mean without allowing for special circumstances is like holding on to one particular thing. The reason why I hate holding to one thing is because it destroys the Way. It takes up one point but neglects a hundred others."³⁷

Concerning position (5) (reducing moral education to the communication of such formulas, so that causal mechanisms such as moral exemplars, or role models, and literature are regarded as strictly speaking inessential), the Chinese tradition, both because it recognizes that morality is more fundamentally a matter of affects than of cognitions and because it recognizes that the rule of good conduct is too complex to be captured in linguistic formulas, puts enormous weight on the function in moral education of the *moral exemplar*, or role model, and on his illustration of morally right action in numerous concrete deeds and words. The moral exemplar and his illustration of morally right action in many specific deeds and words make moral learning possible both by causing (or at least making an important contribution to the

causation of) the relevant affective sentiments in the pupil and by giving him enough concrete, nuanced examples of morally right actions so that he can 'cotton on' to this type despite its great complexity. This vital function that the moral exemplar and his specific deeds/words have in moral education may either take the form of a pupil's *direct* experience of them or of his *indirect* experience of them via a detailed narrative (for instance – to mention some especially important examples – the detailed narrative of Confucius' deeds and words in *The Analects* and in Mencius' text, the detailed narrative of Mencius' deeds and words in his own text, and the detailed narrative of Zhuangzi's deeds and words in *his* own text). Thus Confucius says, with the point about affects and causality mainly in mind: "To rule by virtue is like the way the North Star rules, standing in its place with all the other stars revolving around it and paying court to it."³⁸ And he also says, this time mainly with a view to the point about the unformulable complexity of morally correct action, that rather than retaining a multiplicity of things in his mind, "I bind it together into a single thread" (i.e. in the sum of his own deeds and words).³⁹ Likewise, Mencius, who (it will be recalled) similarly holds that morality is based on affective feelings and resists formulation due to its great complexity, emphasizes the importance of both directly and indirectly encountered moral exemplars as means of moral education in the following remark, where he mainly has the point about affects and causality in mind: "A sage is the teacher of a hundred generations ... Therefore when men now hear the character of Po-i, the corrupt become pure, and the weak acquire determination. When they hear the character of Hiu..., the mean become generous, and the niggardly become liberal. *Those two* made themselves distinguished a hundred generations ago, and after a hundred generations, those

34 *Source Book*, 37.

35 *Ibid.*, 26. A puzzling remark in *The Analects* to the effect that Confucius did not say much about humanity (*ren*) or suitability (*li*) (*The Analects*, 129) should probably also be interpreted along these lines. Concerning Confucius' avoidance of explicit rules, cf. François Jullien, *Le Détour et l'accès*, in *La pensée chinoise dans le miroir de la philosophie*, Chs. 9–10, 332–382.

36 *Source Book*, 75. Cf. *The Works of Mencius*, 215–216, 231–232, 313, 345–346, 383 for further examples.

37 *Source Book*, 80; cf. *The Works of Mencius*, 432–433 on the many different ways of being virtuous. Concerning Mencius' avoidance of rules, cf. Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, 1463–1464.

38 Confucius, *The Analects*, 12; cf. 13, 57, 107, 199; also 4, 6, 10 on the importance of staying close to the right people.

39 *Ibid.*, 248.

who hear them, are all aroused *in this manner!* ... And how much more did they affect those who were in contiguity with them, and felt their inspiring influence!"⁴⁰ And Mencius also says, this time mainly with the problem of complexity in mind: "Humanity is man. When embodied in man's conduct, it is the Way."⁴¹ The Confucian *Doctrine of the Mean* likewise contains clear statements of the position that the affective nature of morality and the highly complex nature of moral rules entail that the moral exemplar and his deeds and words play an essential role in moral education.⁴²

Concerning position (6) (reducing morality to just a single moral standard), the Chinese tradition avoids this common Western mistake, instead recognizing that morality involves an irreducible multiplicity of standards. For example, Confucius says that while humaneness requires courage, the converse is not the case;⁴³ Mencius distinguishes between the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, self-consecration, and fidelity;⁴⁴ and the Confucian *Doctrine of the Mean* distinguishes between three main virtues – "Wisdom, humanity, and courage, these are the universal virtues"⁴⁵ – before indeed going on to distinguish between even more.⁴⁶ Moreover, Mo Zi not only champions the same sort of pluralism, but also adds the striking (and strikingly modern-sounding) further thought that the multiple values involved are incommensurable with each other (like the length of wood and the length of night): "Canon: Different classes are not comparable. The explanation lies in

measurement. Explanation: Difference: Of wood and night, which is the longer? Of knowledge and grain, which is the greater? Of the four things – rank, family, good conduct, and price – which is the most valuable?"⁴⁷

Concerning position (7) (insisting that there is only a single set of moral values, whether internally unitary or plural), while this point can easily be overlooked when reading early Chinese texts, it seems in fact to have been a fundamental assumption behind much early Chinese practical philosophy that different societies and even different individuals have *conflicting moral values*. For example, Mo Zi describes the (for a Chinese sensibility) very alien and even shocking moral values and practices of certain non-Chinese tribes (the Kaimu, the Yan, and the Yiqu) concerning how to treat relatives.⁴⁸ And in an especially important passage he says that already in older times

there was the saying 'People have different principles.' This meant that if there was one person, there was one principle; if there were two people, there were two principles; and if there were ten people, there were ten principles ... It was a case of people affirming their own principles and condemning those of other people. The consequence of this was mutual condemnation ... Because the world was vast and there were people of distant countries and different lands, the distinctions between right and wrong, and between benefit and harm, could not be clearly understood by one or two people.⁴⁹

Moreover, Confucius says, in what I would suggest is a similar spirit, "When your paths are

40 *The Works of Mencius*, 484–485 (accents on the proper names omitted); cf. 194, 205–206, 292, 391–392.

41 *Source Book*, 80–81. Concerning Mencius' assignment of an important function to moral exemplars, or role models, cf. Jullien, *Fonder la morale*, 1495–1496, 1515–1518. However, Jullien tends, misleadingly in my view, to emphasize much more *pragmatic* motives behind this position than I do here.

42 *Source Book*, 110–112.

43 Confucius, *The Analects*, 220; cf. 294.

44 *The Works of Mencius*, 414, 419, 456, 460, 466, 468.

45 *Source Book*, 105.

46 *Ibid.*, 112.

47 Mo Zi, *The Book of Master Mo*, 237–238.

48 *Ibid.*, 123.

49 *Ibid.*, 51–52; cf. 53, 55–72. Mo Zi goes on to argue that it is the main function of a ruler and of political authority more broadly to put an end to this value-anarchy by unifying people's values.

different, there is no point in seeking advice from one another.”⁵⁰

Finally, concerning position (8) (Western meta-ethics’ schizophrenic vacillation between the Scylla of asserting morality’s complete independence from pragmatic considerations and the Charybdis of reducing it to them), Confucius attractively avoids both of these extremes. On the one hand, he insists that morality trumps pragmatic considerations in certain situations – for example, that one should sacrifice wealth, eminence, and even one’s life to the Way if necessary.⁵¹ But on the other hand, he nonetheless insists that pragmatic considerations – both individual and collective ones – *do play an important role* in morality. For example, he appeals in support of being righteous to the fact that this will tend to win an individual other people’s trust and ensure him a longer life,⁵² and to the fact that righteousness normally leads to good collective outcomes for society whereas wickedness leads to bad ones.⁵³ Mencius’ position is similar: he too holds that righteousness should be preferred even over one’s own life if necessary,⁵⁴ but he too nonetheless argues that the ruler who is virtuous thereby benefits both himself and others.⁵⁵ Finally, Mo Zi holds a similar position to that of Confucius and Mencius, placing just a little more emphasis than they do on the need to complement purely moral considerations with ones about individual and collective pragmatic interests when justifying decisions concerning moral value.

This whole insistence on paying attention not only to purely moral considerations but also to individual and collective pragmatic ones when

assessing moral value helps to explain and to justify another striking and important feature of the Chinese tradition in practical philosophy that distinguishes it from most Western practical philosophy: the fact that the Chinese tradition devotes much attention to providing *empirical evidence*, and in particular *historical evidence*, that the moral values advocated tend to produce good pragmatic outcomes. This feature is common to Confucius, Mencius, and Mo Zi.⁵⁶ And it arguably once again constitutes a significant point of superiority in Chinese meta-ethics over its Western counterpart.⁵⁷

In short, not only is Chinese practical philosophy strikingly similar to, and every bit as attractive as, the mainstream of Western practical philosophy in connection with first-order morality, and moreover blessed with the advantage of chronological priority, but in addition it tends to espouse much more insightful positions than Western practical philosophy in relation to meta-ethical questions.

3 Some Exceptions

That is the “big picture” that I wanted to paint. But, as is usual with such “big pictures,” it requires certain qualifications. For there are exceptions to the rule on both sides of it. So let me now complicate the account I have just given a bit by mentioning some of these exceptions.

50 Confucius, *The Analects*, 267.

51 Confucius, *The Analects*, 45, 48, 252. Cf. Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, 77–78.

52 Confucius, *The Analects*, 23, 89, 255, 284.

53 See e.g. *ibid.*, 125–128, 269–273.

54 See e.g. *The Works of Mencius*, 411–412. Cf. Mencius’ aversion to exclusively focusing on profit, or advantage, when deciding on a course of action (*ibid.*, 429–430).

55 See e.g. *ibid.*, 199–201. Cf. *Source Book*, 66–67, 71.

56 For Confucius, see e.g. *The Analects*, 223–232; for Mencius, see e.g. *The Works of Mencius*, 293, 316 ff., 431–434; for Mo Zi, see e.g. *The Book of Master Mo*, 37–39, 42.

57 How successfully or otherwise these thinkers *actually implement* this policy is another question. For example, Mo Zi’s implementation of it often seems to involve a good deal of unrealistic Golden Age-ism. And François Jullien, who rightly perceives this policy in Mencius (see *Fonder la morale*, 1518 ff.), argues that it runs into problems with the evidence (*ibid.*, 1525), and even that Mencius seems eventually to have lost his initial optimism that it supports his moral principles (*ibid.*, 538–544).

To begin with a few exceptions on the Chinese side: Concerning position (1) (giving morality an otherworldly foundation), unlike Confucius and Mencius, Mo Zi does champion a sort of dependence of moral value on the divine (in particular, on the “will of Heaven”). Concerning position (2) (cognitivism), Confucius’ own somewhat ambiguous statements concerning the choice between sentimentalism and cognitivism encouraged a split among his followers between those who, like Mencius, espoused sentimentalism and those, especially the authors of the Confucian *Great Learning*, who rather championed a form of cognitivism. And concerning position (7) (insisting that there is only one set of moral values), Mencius diverges from both Mo Zi and (arguably) Confucius by firmly championing a sort of universalism about moral values.⁵⁸

However, the exceptions that I have in mind mainly concern the Western tradition. For, of course, this tradition has been far from monolithic, instead containing a number of different and often mutually opposed strands. Indeed, the meta-ethical intuitions I have just been drawing on in order to paint the “big picture” I painted are themselves ones that I arrived at largely as a result of reflecting on some of the less central strands of Western practical philosophy (only subsequently finding them supported by the core of the Chinese tradition).

Thus, concerning position (1) (otherworldly foundations for morality), fortunately, there have also been a number of practical philosophers in the West who, like Confucius and Mencius in China, view morality as entirely independent of any otherworldly source of authority – for example, Protagoras, Hume, and the Utilitarians.⁵⁹

Concerning position (2) (free will), fortunately, a few Western moral philosophers – though in this case only a few – have rejected the very conceptions

of a “free will” and of its indispensability for moral responsibility. The most important example here is Nietzsche.⁶⁰

Concerning position (3) (cognitivism), fortunately, like the Chinese tradition, a significant strand in Western practical philosophy has recognized that the basis of morality lies in moral sentiments rather than in cognitions. Hume and his followers are the best known example of this position. But there is also an in certain respects subtler tradition of moral sentimentalism in the West, prominently represented by Herder and Nietzsche, that recognizes, as Hume did not, but as we saw the Chinese tradition likewise does, that the moral sentiments involved (and indeed sentiments more generally) are in essential part constituted by cognitions.⁶¹ Moreover, the Western sentimentalist tradition has developed a number of important arguments for sentimentalism that are not to be found in the Chinese tradition. These include Hume’s justly famous argument that since moral judgments are intrinsically motivating, but only sentiments or passions can motivate, not reason alone (“reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions”), moral judgments must be based on sentiments or passions.⁶² They also include a

60 See Michael N. Forster, “Nietzsche on Free Will,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Tom Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

61 See on this Michael N. Forster, “Nietzsche on Morality as a ‘Sign Language of the Affects,’” *Inquiry* (2017), 60/1–2.

62 See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). For interpretation of the argument and also a close variant of it (“the argument from queerness”, cf. John L. Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) and *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Various attempts have been made in recent years to undermine Hume’s argument – for example, John McDowell’s objection that its appeal rests on a false “quasi-hydraulic,” i.e. mechanical-causal, model of the mind (John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998], 213) and Thomas Nagel’s objection that even prudential actions are often fully explicable in terms of cognitions alone, the additional attribution of a self-regarding

58 *Source Book*, 55–56.

59 Kant could almost be added to this list, but, as we saw in connection with his position on the *summum bonum*, he tries to have it both ways.

line of argument that Herder and Nietzsche developed according to which the various moralities that have occurred over the course of history can in each case be quite adequately explained in terms of the contribution they make to the functioning of the particular sort of society to which they belong, without any need for recourse to special moral “facts” in addition.⁶³ Finally, Herder’s and especially Nietzsche’s versions of sentimentalism also have the important advantage over Hume’s, or for that matter Rousseau’s, in the West and Mencius’ in China that they realize (i) that the sentiments constitutive of morality can vary dramatically, indeed even to the point of being quite opposed, between one period or culture and another, and in particular (ii) that these sentiments by no means always include or support such kind impulses as Hume’s sympathy or Rousseau’s pity or Mencius’

humanity (*ren*), but in some cases even rather oppose such impulses as temptations or vices.⁶⁴

Concerning position (4) (capturing morality in formulas), fortunately, like its Chinese counterpart, a significant strand of Western practical philosophy has been skeptical about the possibility of capturing moral principles in formulas (such as Socratic definitions, Kant’s categorical imperative, or the Utilitarians’ “greatest happiness of the greatest number”). For example, Aristotle famously argued that the cognitive component of moral attunement requires a faculty of judgment, *phronêsis*, whose criteria are not precisely formulable. And the later Wittgenstein, less famously, but perhaps even more illuminatingly, argued that moral concepts – e.g. good, bad, right, wrong, and numerous ‘thicker’ moral concepts as well – are “family resemblance” concepts, which at bottom classify familiar non-moral features of the world (e.g. types of character, intention, or action) but of their very nature resist capture in a definition.⁶⁵

Concerning position (5) (reducing moral education to the communication of such formulas, so that causal mechanisms such as moral exemplars, or role models, are strictly speaking inessential for it), fortunately, a significant strand in Western practical philosophy has rejected this too. For example, the Sophist Protagoras, as he is depicted in the Great Discourse in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, already assigned a fundamental

motive being in such cases merely a sort of superfluous periphrasis of a purely cognitive explanation (Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970], pt. 2, esp. 29–30). However, such objections to the argument are not very convincing. Pace McDowell, the force of Hume’s point does not essentially depend on a “quasi-hydraulic,” or mechanical-causal, model of the mind at all, even if he does happen to hold one (nor, conversely, would such a model have to imply Hume’s point, since a mechanical-causal explanation could just as well involve a single cause as a double one). Pace Nagel, it seems plausible to argue that explanations of prudential actions by reference to a cognition alone always implicitly assume the presence of a self-regarding motive of some sort, merely one that is usually too obvious to require explicit mention. This fact can be shown, for example, by constructing thought-experiments in which the person who receives the explanations happens to come from a remote planet where, unlike us, people are habitually self-destructive and self-denying (but, say, spared from extinction by a benign higher power that routinely saves them from themselves), so that merely pointing out to him the cognition involved without mentioning the self-regarding motive will not suffice to explain the resulting action to him. In short, Hume’s argument for sentimentalism remains a powerful one.

63 See on this Forster, “Nietzsche on Morality as a ‘Sign Language of the Affects.’”

64 Cf. *ibid.* It therefore seems to me a weakness in François Jullien’s account of Mencius’ moral philosophy in *Fonder la morale* that he tends to endorse the assumptions of universalism and kindness that Mencius’ version of sentimentalism makes but that Herder and Nietzsche rightly call into question.

65 See esp. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures Cambridge 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), where Wittgenstein develops such an account of both moral concepts and aesthetic ones. For a general discussion of “family resemblance” concepts, as well as some remarks on the moral case in particular, see Michael N. Forster, “Wittgenstein on Family Resemblance Concepts,” in *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Arif Ahmed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

role in moral education to the influence of role models, together with other causal mechanisms such as poetry/literature. And Herder – on the basis of a more explicit rejection of cognitivism in favor of sentimentalism than can yet be found in Protagoras – likewise assigns role models and other purely causal mechanisms such as poetry/literature a fundamental role in his theory of moral education.⁶⁶

Concerning position (6) (reducing morality to just a single moral standard), fortunately, like Chinese practical philosophy, a significant minority position in Western practical philosophy has instead espoused a fundamental pluralism about moral values. For example, besides the ancient tragedians with their consequent focus on moral dilemmas, Protagoras as he is depicted in Plato's *Protagoras*, Herder, Isaiah Berlin, and more recently Elizabeth Anderson have all championed versions of such a pluralism.

Concerning position (7) (insisting that there is only a single set of moral values, whether unitary or plural), fortunately, a few Western practical philosophers, like their Chinese counterparts, have taken the contrary position that there exist a multiplicity of moralities. Examples of this position are Herder, Schleiermacher, and Nietzsche (who famously remarked that there are “many moralities”).⁶⁷

Finally, concerning position (8) (the schizophrenic vacillation between the Scylla of asserting morality's complete independence of pragmatic considerations and the Charybdis of reducing it to them), fortunately, a few Western practical philosophers, like their Chinese counterparts, have exploited the availability of a middle course here that allows pragmatic considerations to play an

important role in morality but without reducing it to them. Examples of such a position include Aristotle and Hume (whose moral philosophy incorporates a strong utilitarian strand).

In short, there are a number of significant exceptions to the “big picture” that I have painted according to which Western meta-ethics has been inferior to Chinese meta-ethics in the eight respects considered. Nonetheless, I think that the picture remains approximately correct. The loud extravagance of Western meta-ethics generally turns out to mask philosophical weakness, the quiet minimalism of Chinese meta-ethics philosophical strength.

4 Conclusion

Let me conclude with a few thoughts about the potential benefits to be gained by recognizing and reflecting on this whole situation.

Most obviously, doing so could contribute to a better mutual understanding between Western practical philosophy and Chinese practical philosophy, and thereby even between the West and China more broadly. But it could also contribute to a better *self*-understanding, self-criticism, and self-improvement, especially on the Western side of practical philosophy, though also to a certain extent on the Chinese side.

Concerning first-order morality specifically, recognizing the extraordinary extent to which China shares the West's most fundamental first-order moral convictions, such as cosmopolitanism, the Golden Rule, and the set of more specific humane values that I listed, and that China indeed arrived at all of these even before the West did, could help to reduce widespread Western misunderstandings of and suspicions about China, as well as conversely. In particular, this could happen in connection with the delicate issue of human rights, for the sort of comparison between Western and Chinese practical philosophy that I have sketched here shows that the cosmopolitanism, the Golden Rule, and the more specific humane values that underpin

66 See on this Michael N. Forster, *Herder's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Introduction and Chs. 6–7.

67 Concerning Herder and Nietzsche, see Forster, “Nietzsche on Morality as a ‘Sign Language of the Affects.’” Schleiermacher's most relevant work is his *Soliloquies [Monologen]* (1800).

the West's commitment to human rights have an equally firm, and indeed even more longstanding, footing in the Chinese tradition. Recognizing this fact could reduce common Western prejudices about China in the area of human rights, as well as conversely, and thereby help the two sides to cooperate on this vitally important subject. By doing so, it could also facilitate a less obvious but even more substantial and enduring boost to human rights. For, as I have pointed out in other work, some of the most powerful and lasting changes in moralities that have taken place over the course of history have done so precisely when and because two independent cultural traditions have more or less coincidentally developed similar moral positions and a sort of confluence of these positions has then occurred so that they came to co-influence a new era.⁶⁸ Something like this could very well happen between the West and China in connection with human rights.

Concerning meta-ethics, beyond advancing mutual understanding between the West and China, the contrast that I have drawn between mainstream Western meta-ethics and mainstream Chinese meta-ethics could also help Western philosophers to see how idiosyncratic and questionable their longstanding, Plato-driven commitments to such principles as an other-worldly foundation of morality, free will, moral cognitivism, moral formulas, and moral monism have been. Moreover, it could help them to find resources for more constructive improvements of their own meta-ethics, such as the Chinese

tradition's sophisticated two-part explanation of why role models are indispensable means of moral education in terms of both moral sentimentalism and complexity. Nor would such improvements have to be limited to philosophical theory; they could also have a beneficial impact on moral behavior. For example, overcoming the West's misguided mainstream meta-ethics would remove one of the main sources of the widespread skepticism about morality that afflicts the general populace of the West, which often quite rightly 'smells a fish' in this meta-ethics even if it does not identify its defects more precisely, and unfortunately as a consequence throws out not only the bathwater of this implausible meta-ethics itself but also the baby of morality along with it. Moreover, correcting mainstream Western meta-ethics' blindness to the essential role that moral exemplars and other causal mechanisms such as literature play in moral education would make it easier for these mechanisms to flourish in practice, thereby improving moral education in this further way as well.

Finally, the sort of contrast between Western meta-ethics and Chinese meta-ethics that I have sketched here could also be helpful on the Chinese side. For example, besides enabling a better understanding of the West, it might also help Chinese practical philosophy to perceive its own distinctive meta-ethical profile more clearly and to have greater confidence in it, especially when it meets with ill-considered resistance and condescension from the West. Moreover, it might afford certain resources for further refining Chinese meta-ethics. These would come, not from the mainstream of Western meta-ethics, but rather from the minority currents in it that I have touched on. Some promising examples would be Hume's, Herder's, and Nietzsche's two sophisticated arguments for moral sentimentalism, Wittgenstein's account of moral concepts as "family resemblance" concepts, Protagoras's and Herder's rich identification of the various causal mechanisms of moral education, and the Herder-Schleiermacher-Nietzsche tradition's case for the diversity of moral values.

68 See Michael N. Forster, "Nietzsche: Three Genealogies of Christianity," *Genealogy* (2022) (online). The prime example of this phenomenon that I discuss there is the historical transition from Homeric culture's valorizations of fame, political power, martial prowess, exacting revenge, wealth, and successful lying/deception to their opposites in the Western tradition. An approximate analogy for the mechanism at the level of individual psychology would be the fact that hearing an evaluative pronouncement or an opinion from several independent sources is much more likely to make a person accept it than hearing it from just one.