David Wong’s Interpretation of Confucian Moral Psychology

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1 Introduction and Overview

In his inspiring and insightful article, “Early Confucian Philosophy and the Development of Compassion” (Wong 2015), David Wong analyzes Confucian metaphors such as “adornment,” “water flowing downward,” “growing sprouts,” and “craft” in relation to Confucian self-cultivation and moral development. These metaphors, according Wong, represent unique moral psychological viewpoints of early Confucian philosophers. Among these metaphors, the craft metaphor represents a reformatory or transformative approach to moral development. Under this metaphor, one changes and reshapes one’s unregulated or reflexive tendencies for ideal and stable character traits of moral excellence and sagehood. However, the other metaphors (adorning, water flowing downward, and growing sprouts metaphors) take different routes to moral development and self-cultivation. They emphasize morally predisposed tendencies of the human mind and their dynamic force and development in an ideal environment of moral cultivation. These metaphors represent a formative or enriching approach to moral development. Although the two groups of metaphors represent contrastive viewpoints of moral psychology, Wong does not believe that they facilitate two

1Wong interprets the metaphors in the following ways. The adornment metaphor: “Observing ritual propriety presupposes that one has some basic stuff that does not need substantial alteration but rather refinement and appropriate expression” (Wong 2015: 159; references to this article hereafter will be indicated with page numbers only). The craft metaphor: “Observing ritual is necessary for restraining and reshaping the self, implying that the basic stuff must be transformed in major ways and not just adorned” (160). The water-flowing-downward metaphor: the metaphor “imparts a dynamic quality to human nature by characterizing it in terms of direction of movement, of change … this direction is toward the ethical” (162). The growing-sprout metaphor: “More needs to be done ‘pro-actively’ to foster growth in the ethical direction: not only must the right environmental conditions be in place mainly through the agency of others, but the possessor of the sprouts must put effort into cultivating them” (164).
mutually exclusive or opposite viewpoints of Confucian self-cultivation. They emphasize different aspects of moral development but they also illustrate how different forces or processes (i.e., natural and environmental conditions, and spontaneous and deliberate processes) can be combined in Confucian self-cultivation. Wong also believes that these metaphors not only explain Confucian moral development, but also stimulate empirically viable theories of moral development. In fact, the Confucian approach to moral development is, at least partially, compatible with many empirical studies of moral cognition.

To summarize, Wong argues that these metaphors reveal different aspects or dimensions of Confucian self-cultivation (W1). In early Confucianism, these metaphors complement each other to explain diverse aspects of the moral mind and moral development (W2). These metaphors reflect two important features of Confucian moral psychology: moral development is relational and holistic (W3). One’s self-cultivation (or moral development in general) integrates emotional and cognitive abilities of the mind and combine one’s personal and social development. That is, moral development, in Confucian moral tradition, is integrative of cognitive and emotional processes and is always interactive with external environments, including one’s relation to others and one’s social statuses and roles. Ultimately, the goal of Confucian moral development lies in the holistic and relational change in the Confucian heart-mind (xin 心). Wong believes that these Confucian moral metaphors are not only philosophically insightful, but also psychologically convincing (W4). Specifically, in comparison with recent empirical studies of moral development and moral cognition, they are not simply figures of speech or speculative theories of moral metaphysics, but a powerful moral psychological insight.

In this article, I will develop my critical comments on Wong’s views summarized above. First, regarding W1, I will argue that Wong’s discussion of the “growing sprouts” metaphor, specifically in the context of Mencius’ siduan 四端 (the four beginnings), can be misleading. It seems that this metaphor is too biological (i.e., horticultural or agricultural). Other less biological interpretations are possible and they can, perhaps, provide good explanations of Mencius’ moral psychology.

Second, regarding W4, I will argue that Wong’s discussion of mindfulness meditation and moral grammar theory is misrepresenting important characteristics of mindfulness and moral grammar. Wong believes that mindfulness cultivates conscious and regulative processes of self-cultivation. However, the actual psychological processes of mindfulness (observed in many brain imaging studies) are characterized as unbiased awareness of one’s inner states without intentional or deliberate regulation. That is, mindfulness is not achieved by effortful or intentional control of one’s disruptive emotions. Obviously, mindfulness is helpful in regulating one’s emotions, but its underlying processes do not utilize intentional regulation or deliberate control. Regarding moral grammar theory, Wong does not discuss the full potential of the moral grammar or moral faculty theory developed by Hauser and Mikhail (Hauser 2006; Mikhail 2007, 2011). He rejects the theory rather quickly without fully considering its theoretical details that can provide a good explanation of how universal or cross-cultural moral intuitions can accommodate culturally and socially diverse forms of moral judgments. The moral grammar theory is not a major debating point in his article, but it deserves further exploration, explanation, and clarification as a viable theory of moral psychology and moral development.