Chapter 2 --- Confucian Self-Cultivation

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THIS FILE AND THE NEXT CONTAIN TWO CHAPTERS ON MORAL SELF-SHAPING FROM A BOOK-IN-PROGRESS CALLED *FREEDOM AND DESERT.* Michael Slote

Chapter 2 --- Confucian Self-Cultivation

In this chapter I shall examine Confucian views about moral self-cultivation with an eye to seeing whether they plausibly and realistically allow for the necessary conditions of moral responsibility to be met by human beings. In the course of our discussion I shall consider various (Western) views about the psychological bases of moral education in order to see whether they can be used to show the possibility of moral self-cultivation, and what I have to say by way of support for or critique of those various views will then be brought to bear on what the Confucians have said over the millennia about the possibilities and practicalities for self-cultivation. In a nutshell, I think most of the familiar Western accounts of moral education are inadequate as accounts of moral development and thus as accounts of moral self-development as well. But there is one approach to moral education that does seem to me to have promise, an approach that makes the existence and enhancement of our empathic capacities central to the process of becoming a better person. But for reasons we shall see such an approach makes moral development depend too much on outside factors to allow for deliberate general moral self-improvement along the lines laid down by the Confucians. And I want to begin with a presumably historical anecdote that illustrates the dependence on outside factors that I shall argue mainly characterizes human moral education and moral development.

The Judeo-Christian Bible (2 Samuel 12) tells us a very moving story about what happened to King David after he took Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah the Hittite. David had deliberately sent Uriah to

die in battle, and when David subsequently took Bathsheba to be his wife, the prophet Nathan came to him and told him of a man with a large flock of sheep who had robbed a poorer man of his only sheep. When David immediately vowed to punish (with death) the man who had done that, Nathan told him "Thou art the man!"—going on to explain that in taking Bathsheba from her husband, the rich and powerful David had acted just like the man with the large flock. The Bible makes a point of treating this episode as teaching David an effective moral lesson, and one can certainly see how David could have learned something ethically very important from what Nathan, so cleverly and so forcefully, had told him.

I shall assume here that moral learning, moral education, can occur in something like the way Nathan taught King David, and I want to set a large number of other issues about moral education against this background. In the West, there are various different approaches to moral learning that occur in relation to one or another philosophical approach to morality. But apart from the issue of philosophical adequacy, I think almost all of the accounts of moral education have, in psychological terms, been woefully inadequate. I want to say something here about why I believe this to be so, and at the same time I am also going to sketch out what I take to be a pretty plausible account of how moral learning can and does occur. Then I want to turn to Confucian (by which I mean to include neo-Confucian and new Confucian) views about moral education. Kongzi (Confucius) and a number of other great Chinese thinkers anticipate some of the most plausible Western ideas about moral education, but in other areas or respects, I believe Chinese thinkers have misconceived moral education in ways that closely parallel the ways it has sometimes been misconceived in the West.

Throughout its history Chinese and Confucian thought has placed great emphasis on the idea of moral self-cultivation, somewhat more, I believe, than Western thinkers have done. But I think that moral self-education is a much less important and much less realistic idea than Chinese thought and

some Western philosophers have assumed, and my main purpose in this chapter is to explain or at least begin to explain why I believe this to be so. And the example I started with, from the Judeo-Christian Bible, is clearly *not* an example of moral self-cultivation. Rather, it shows us someone in need of and benefiting from *outside moral help*, and I want to argue that almost all moral learning occurs through and by means of some such help. Self-cultivation as a concept implies an activity that one can largely take charge of on one's own (even if one sometimes relies on other people during that process); and though I don't think moral self-cultivation of this kind never occurs, it has, I believe, a much less important or assured place in our lives and in our moral education than the Chinese traditions have assumed. Or so, at least, I shall attempt to show you now. I therefore propose to say some positive and some critical things about various Western ideas about moral education, and then I shall make use of that discussion to take on the very particular subject of moral self-cultivation as it has been described and recommended by various Chinese thinkers.

1

I am going to begin by considering certain rationalist approaches to moral education that have occurred (in the West) in conjunction to one or another theoretical/philosophical theory of (political and/or individual) morality; and I shall first talk about what is probably the most well-known rationalistic approach to moral learning that has ever been articulated and defended: Lawrence Kohlberg's "cognitive-developmentalism." Kohlberg's approach derives in great part from the work of Jean Piaget, and both Piaget and Kohlberg saw the teaching and learning of morality as occurring along basically Kantian lines and as essentially a cognitive process.1 Kohlberg saw moral development and the moral reasoning that he considered central to it as occurring (in principle) through six different stages and three basic levels (each level containing two stages). The three levels were the pre-conventional, the

conventional, and the post-conventional, and attainment of the final level was characterized by an ability to think of moral problems in terms of very general or abstract principles like Kant's Categorical Imperative. Such thinking clearly seems to require more advanced cognitive development than the concern for fitting in with or preserving the group that Kohlberg says characterizes the earlier stages of *conventional* moral thinking.

But even if what Kohlberg says seems plausible as an account of how moral *thinking* develops, it doesn't do much to explain the origins and development of moral *motivation*, the desire actually to do what (more and more advanced) moral injunctions and principles tell us we ought to do. This point has been made by numerous critics, and Kohlberg himself allows that purely cognitive development cannot ensure substantial moral motivation. He even talks about empathy as somehow involved in moving (people) beyond the cognizance of moral norms to reliable moral motivation, but he never nails any of this down, and that seems to me to represent a major difficulty with the way he approaches moral education. Indeed, I shall argue here that empathy gives us our best purchase both on moral motivation and on how moral education most readily occurs, and the fact that Kohlberg ultimately invoked empathy and role-playing involving empathy as a mechanism or means of ensuring the moral motivation to conform to more or less abstract or universal principles seems to me to point in the direction of the kind of empathy-based sentimentalist account of moral education I shall be describing and defending in this chapter. But let me now say something very briefly about John Rawls's account of moral learning.2

Like Kohlberg, Rawls draws on the work of Piaget in setting forth his ideas about moral education, but despite his overall tendency toward ethical/political rationalism, Rawls seems to think he needs to bring some emotional/feelingful elements into his account of how moral learning occurs. He says that children need their parents' love if they are effectively to learn and to be motivated to conform to basic moral and political principles (like his own principles of justice). So, once again, emotional factors are

brought into what seems otherwise to be a fairly rationalistic account of moral education, and one can see why Rawls might have felt he needed to do this. Without strengthening or evoking certain emotional factors in the child, it is difficult to see how to get beyond the problem Kohlberg's theory ran into: the problem that articulated principles on their own and independently of factors like empathy and feeling seem to provide an inadequate motivational basis for full-blown moral development. And this same sort of problem also seems to attach to a third form of moral rationalism I haven't previously mentioned.

Present-day ethical rationalists (including some who would emphasize the similarity between Kant's views and Aristotle's) sometimes claim that the sheer rational appreciation of (the true nature of) certain facts can automatically motivate us in certain ways. Thus Thomas Nagel has argued that the clear recognition that one will later have reason to do something can automatically or ipso facto motivate one to prepare now for that eventuality.3 And John McDowell has claimed that if we properly appreciate what someone else is suffering, we will ipso facto be motivated to help them.4 These philosophers have never suggested any form of moral education that would help us toward rationally appreciating, say, the needs of others and then doing what morality would dictate by way of helping them. And I want to suggest that this cannot be done without bringing in empathic feeling (just as Kohlberg and, in his own way, Rawls eventually had to do). After all, what prevents a psychopath from appreciating how bad things are for one of his (potential) victims and from being motivated to help them (or not hurt them in the first place)? Psychopaths are famous for being able to "get inside the heads" of their (potential) victims, so how can a rationalist like Nagel or McDowell say that their lack of appropriate motivation is due to their failure to appreciate certain facts or see them as relevantly salient?

Well, let me suggest that empathy may make the difference here and may be (part of) the only possible explanation of the difference of motivation between a psychopath and a moral person. The psychopath may be able to get into other people's heads (which involves what is often called projective

empathy), but they lack the ability and tendency to empathically feel what others feel (what is sometimes called associative empathy): e. g., they feel joy when someone (a victim) is in pain rather than (involuntarily or without deliberate/conscious choice) feeling the other person's pain. So if the psychopath fails to fully or properly appreciate certain morally relevant facts, that may well be because they lack the capacity for associative feeling-laden empathy. Once again, the ethical rationalism we are considering seems to need to move away from strict rationalism and toward a view of moral education and learning that stresses feeling and empathy as motivating factors.

So let me put my cards on the table and (deliberately to switch metaphors) take the bull by the horns. I think (increasing) empathy is the crucial factor in moral education, and I propose to tell you now how and why I think this is so.

David Hume was the first person in the West to explicitly talk about empathy (though the word "empathy" didn't exist in the eighteenth century and he had to use the term "sympathy" in a somewhat ambiguous way, instead). There are also hints and more than hints of our present-day notion of empathy in the earlier work of certain Chinese thinkers (Wang Yang-Ming, Cheng Hao, and even perhaps as far back as Mencius/Mengzi), but serious empirical work on empathy began only in the last fifty years or so and has occurred mainly in English-speaking countries. Nowadays, as a result of such research and a good deal of popular usage, we English-speakers tend to distinguish empathy from sympathy in a fairly uniform way. Roughly speaking, empathy is what Bill Clinton was self-ascribing when he famously said: I feel your pain. But sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone who is in pain and wanting to do something or see something done about it. Some more mature "feats" of empathy can depend on our possession of certain concepts and on cognitive maturation/learning more generally: as when we empathize with some whole group of people we have never met, e. g., the starving or oppressed people of a certain country. (The fact that mature empathy of the sort moral sentimentalism relies on can

depend on cognitive/conceptual rationality doesn't mean that it requires *practical* reason or rationality in the Kantian sense that figures essentially in most forms of ethical rationalism.) And many contemporary psychologists subscribe to an empathy/altruism hypothesis according to which our altruistic and general moral tendencies depend on and are strengthened by our being empathic.5 But then we need to consider how empathy can be deliberately or otherwise strengthened if we are to make central use of that notion in a (sentimentalist) account of moral education.

The first step in understanding how this all happens was made, I believe, by the psychologist Martin Hoffman. (Other people—Nel Noddings and I in particular—have had the same basic idea, but Hoffman took it much further than others did.) Hoffman holds that the development of fully caring or altruistic motivation and behavior requires the intervention of parents and others making use of what he calls "inductive discipline" or often just "induction."6 Induction contrasts with the "power-asserting" attempt to discipline, train, or influence a child through sheer threats (carried out if the child doesn't comply) and with attempts to inculcate moral thought, motivation, and behavior (merely) by citing or admonishing with explicit moral precepts or injunctions.6a Inductive training depends, rather, on the child's initial capacity for empathy with others and involves (say) a parent's noticing when their child hurts others and then (in a non-threatening but firm manner) making the child vividly aware of the harm that he or she has done—most notably by getting the child to focus on and feel how things must feel for the child whom they have hurt. This leads the normal child with a good relationship with his or her parents to feel bad—a kind of rudimentary guilt—about what s/he has done.

Hoffman believes that if such training is applied consistently over time, the child will come to associate bad feelings (guilt) with situations in which the harm s/he can do is not yet done, an association that is functionally autonomous of parents' or others' actual intervention and constitutes or supports altruistic motivation. And he also holds that this process helps to support the motivational

efficacy of moral rules and moral injunctions when these are (eventually) directed at the child. In addition, he says that educative techniques similar to induction can reinforce or strengthen children's concern for other people generally. Both parents and schools can expose children to literature, films, or television programs that make the troubles and tragedies of distant or otherwise-unknown (groups of) people vivid to them—and they can encourage their sensitivity to such people by asking students/children to imagine how they or some family member would feel if such things were happening to them or if *they themselves* had caused such things to happen to others.

But there is more to be said—and that Hoffman himself does not say—about the significance of induction. Some people aspire to be morally better people, and others model themselves deliberately on certain moral exemplars, and what Hoffman says about induction can help an empathy-based theory of moral education to account, at least in part, for these phenomena. Thus if, as a result of inductive discipline, the child associates feeling bad with various kinds of harming, then, as Hoffman says, the child is going to start associating bad feeling with situations in which the harm s/he can do is not yet done, and this will tend to inhibit the doing of such harm. So the child builds up a *resistance* to (later acts of) harming, and this is equivalent to desiring not to harm as s/he has done in the past. And once the child is making explicit moral judgments, the desire not to harm people in the way one has previously done can be expressed as the desire not to do the kind of wrong actions one has done in the past. Since someone who doesn't do such things is a better person than someone who does, this is in effect the desire to be or become a morally better person.

The desire to emulate or model oneself on some morally admired figure can also be seen from the perspective of the inductive process. If one seeks (for non-egoistic reasons) to be like some such person, one can do so because one feels that that person is morally superior to oneself and doesn't do the kinds of things that one feels bad about having done oneself. And such emulation can occur either consciously

or subliminally. But it is now time to discuss a kind of modeling that typically occurs *without* the knowledge of the person who models him- or herself on another individual. This will involve us in considering another aspect of the role empathy plays in moral development and moral education, something that (again) takes us beyond anything Hoffman tells us about the implications and/or usefulness of inductive discipline.

When parents use induction, they demonstrate an empathic concern for the (say) child who has been hurt by their own child, and there is in fact no reason why a child can't take in such an attitude or such motivation directly from their parent. Hume (in *A Treatise of Human Nature*) held that people's basic feelings can spread to others by contagion or infusion, but he also believed that moral opinions and attitudes can spread in that way. So in most cases induction will not only involve a parent's deliberately making their child more empathically sensitive to the welfare or feelings of others, but also the child's directly taking in, by a kind of empathic osmosis, the parent's own empathic concern for others. And such a taking in will presumably not be limited to occasions where induction is employed, but will occur (or be in the process of occurring) at other times when the child notices how empathically altruistic their parent is. So there are at least two important and understandable ways—induction and modeling—in which empathic concern for other people can be strengthened and the aim(s) of moral education furthered or fulfilled, and this makes the present, sentimentalist approach seem much more plausible and promising, I think, than the rationalist versions of moral education we discussed earlier.

However, there is another, somewhat less rationalistic approach to moral development that we now need to consider: namely, what the Aristotelian tradition has to say about how moral education occurs. Like the sentimentalist empathy-focused view I favor, Aristotelianism (along with the largely American school of "character education" that takes itself as in certain ways derivative from Aristotelianism) regards the moral education of any given individual as requiring quite a lot of input from other people.

But the Aristotelian emphasis is on habituation, not the habituation of guilt feeling that occurs in connection with inductive discipline, but, rather, sheer repetitive and habitual activity. According to Aristotle, parents have to accustom their children to doing the right thing in various situations, and developing rational insight will then (somehow) work together with good habits in facilitating and motivating right actions after the child is no longer under parental tutelage.7

But there are two problems with this. First, the insight into moral truth(s) that Aristotle is talking about is either motivationally inert or it would seem to require the kind of empathic sensitivity we discussed in connection with the views of Nagel and McDowell. Either way, this pushes us toward the sort of sentimentalist approach to moral education I have just been describing. Second, and perhaps more significantly, the habituation or repetition that parents impose or ensure seems to be more a matter of power assertion than of any other motivating factor, and as is well known, power assertion is much less effective than empathically-grounded induction in developing or enhancing altruistic concern for others.8 I am saying, therefore, that Aristotle and Aristotelianism emphasize the importance of repetition and habituation in moral education, but don't offer us a satisfactory explanation of the role these play in the process of moral education. The Aristotelian methodology of or for moral education seems much less likely to create morally altruistic individuals than methods that rely explicitly and deeply on factors relating to empathy, and we have reason to be quite suspicious of any theory of moral education that places so much reliance on habituation as such. But this is just the beginning of what I shall be saying here about the problems and prospects of Aristotelian moral education and of character education to the extent it adheres to Aristotelian modes of such education. (Contemporary character education in America considers empathy to be one of the tools of moral education, and Aristotle didn't introduce empathy into his picture of moral development.) When I discuss Aristotle's views about moral responsibility and the voluntariness of moral character in the next chapter, I will return to the issue of habituation and discuss it in a somewhat fuller way than I have done here. But I think we have seen

enough to make us suspicious about the Aristotelian picture of moral education, and, given the topic of the present chapter, it is now time to see how the previous discussion bears on the question whether moral self-cultivation makes realistic and plausible sense in the terms in which the Chinese traditions have described and advocated it.

2

The idea of moral self-cultivation strongly implies and probably even entails that this is a process that an individual can take charge of and accomplish largely through his or her own efforts. When we talk of self-education in specific school subjects, we mean that an individual learns more and more geography or mathematics largely (though not necessarily entirely) on his or her own, and the same is true across a quite wide range of reflexive verbs. However, P. J. Ivanhoe has pointed out to me that the Chinese term that is often translated as (moral) self-cultivation actually doesn't have any reflexive implications. That term is *xiu yang*, and I am going to assume that he is right about this. But even if he is, Chinese thinkers often say things, regardless of the particular terms they employ, that suggest, strongly suggest and even, often, entail, that individuals can at some point undertake their own moral self-cultivation, become more virtuous through what are basically (though not exclusively) their own efforts. The strong implication is that this is an important, a major way, in which (adult) individuals can become morally better people, and I wish to raise some doubts about that assumption.

The example I introduced at the beginning of this chapter involved the intervention of another person, the prophet Nathan, and, as I mentioned earlier, the moral learning process King David went through was not an instance of self-cultivation—far from it. But, clearly, not every process of moral improvement and education has to be like what happened with King David. When a child imbibes her own parents' empathically altruistic attitudes and motives, no one need be deliberately trying to teach

them a moral lesson—the way Nathan was trying to do with David. But since such cases involve subliminal learning rather than anything deliberate, they (again) clearly don't count as instances of moral self-education, as we would naturally and idiomatically understand that notion.

However, there are other cases in which moral learning doesn't occur in a completely subliminal way and in which a certain amount of (self-)reflection has to take place in order for the learning to occur. Since some of these cases also don't involve anyone deliberately teaching anything, we might wonder whether they can provide us with useful and plausible examples of moral self-cultivation. In the Biblical example, Nathan the prophet got King David to see, to feel, what he had done in order to gain Bathsheba as his wife. But there are other cases where it is possible for someone to notice the bad effect they have had on others without anyone deliberately pointing this out to them.

Imagine, for instance, a factory owner who has always been rather haughty around his employees. In other areas of his life he may show a certain sensitivity to the feelings of others—he is far from being beyond such empathic responsiveness. But he has always been quite insensitive to the feelings of his workers; he has been haughty with them and hard on them, and the employees for their part have always (let us assume) kept their feelings about their employer pretty well hidden. One day, however, he is in the factory and acting in his usual haughty, demanding, and unkind manner, and (for some unexplained reason) he turns around suddenly to where no one has expected him to be looking. When he does so, he notices a look of fear and distaste on the face of one of the workers (who never expected the boss to turn his way). And the factory owner immediately also sees that that face represents a response to the way he, the owner, has just been acting. This shakes him out of his usual mood and manner and makes him leave the factory immediately, and once he does, he starts reflecting on the meaning of what he has just seen. He soon (or eventually) realizes that what he has seen is just the tip of the iceberg. He was acting no differently today from the way he has always acted, but this time, by a

kind of moral luck, he saw the reaction he caused in a given worker; and he is now able to generalize this, to recognize that he has hurt the feelings of a lot of people in the factory and not just on one occasion but over many years.

Such reflection will quite possibly lead the factory owner to become more sensitive to the feelings of his employees and of others as well. The result might be quite similar to what induction is supposed to bring about in children and to what Nathan was trying to bring about in David: namely, a greater empathic sensitivity to the feelings of others and a (greater) reluctance to do certain kinds of things that hurt or harm people. But although the case of the factory owner doesn't involve anyone else teaching him a deliberate moral lesson and does involve a certain amount of self-reflection (reflection, e. g., on the meaning of the given worker's hurt look), I don't think we yet have an example of moral self-cultivation. Moral self-cultivation is something one deliberately sets out to do, and this factory owner had no intention of becoming a better person as a result of his trip to his own factory on a given morning. And yet this is what happened, and it happened because of external factors (that look!) which he couldn't have anticipated and which had a totally unanticipated *effect* on both his feelings and his life.

What the case of the factory owner has in common with inductive teaching/learning, with the King David story, with the subliminal picking-up of parental caring attitudes—what it has in common with every case of moral education or learning we have considered so far—is the fact that the moral learning occurs or has mainly occurred through the influence of factors external to the agent. And that very fact is what makes it inappropriate—linguistically and, I would say, ethically—to treat any of those cases as involving moral self-cultivation. So if moral learning or education can occur through a process of moral self-cultivation, we need other examples to demonstrate that possibility. But although I believe it is possible to find such examples, I think they are fairly rare, fairly difficult to come by. And as I hope to

show you in what follows, that very rareness gives us reason to wonder about the overall usefulness and feasibility of moral self-cultivation. Chinese thought has emphasized the need for and desirability of moral self-cultivation, and it has assumed that such a thing is possible and feasible in many important ways and on a large scale in our lives. But I have doubts about all of this.

So what is or would be a good example of moral self-cultivation? Well, consider a Caucasian American man married to a very Americanized Korean-American woman.9 The woman has introduced him to her family, who are very traditional, and although the Caucasian man tries to keep his reactions to himself, he doesn't entirely succeed. He finds the family weird and unattractive, and it turns out that his brother-in-law (though no other family member) has noticed this fact about him. The man finds this out through his wife's telling him so (or perhaps, as with the factory owner, through noticing how the brother-in-law is reacting to *him*), and he immediately feels very bad about what has happened. His wife is very understanding, very forgiving, about it all, but the man himself feels he has perhaps been unsympathetic to his wife's family, hasn't tried hard enough to understand and warm to them, and upon reflection he decides to do something very specific to make things better. He decides to read a lot of Korean history and literature in order to become more sympathetic with that culture and with his own new family (also for the sake of future children), and if he carries out this resolution, it will be an example of very deliberate moral self-cultivation. And the educative process he has deliberately chosen may end up making him more sensitive to the Korean culture and to Korean people and to some extent, therefore, a better person.9a

But notice two things about this example. It depends, in the first instance, on the intervention or input of others. He doesn't think to cultivate his empathic sensitivity to Korean people all on his own, but decides to do that in response to what he wife tells him (or what he has happened to notice about his brother-in-law's reactions to him). Second, this is a very unusual example. Maybe people *should* go

around reading series of books in order to become more empathic with others, but it doesn't often happen, and it isn't realistic to expect it to start happening very often. And the reason why is that the event that led the Caucasian who has married a Korean-American to undertake a course of readings in Korean history and literature is a fairly rare and unanticipatable (or unpredictable) one. To be sure, such events do happen to people, but it doesn't seem reasonable to expect such events to occur often enough to help everyone become more sensitive and altruistic. If we want altruism, we need to use the techniques of moral education I spoke about earlier and use them when people are still very young. The kind of moral (self-)reflection and self-cultivation that sometimes occur in adult life seem far from sufficient to make for a morally better world (of morally better people).

But this assumes that the example of moral self-cultivation I have just described is basically the only kind of example one can realistically find. And I believe this goes against the entire tradition of Chinese moral teaching(s), so I propose now to consider what some of the main figures of Chinese ethical thought have to say on the topic of moral self-cultivation. Perhaps, that will lead us to a wider range of examples than I have spoken of or allowed, but, of course, it is also possible that Confucian ethics has misconceived and/or exaggerated the possibilities and feasibility of moral self-cultivation. We shall have to see.

3

Let's begin our discussion where so many good things Chinese seem to begin: with Kongzi (Confucius). The *Analects* contains a good deal of wisdom about moral education/learning and about a whole host of other topics. But I want to confine my comments to what Kongzi says about moral education and moral self-cultivation, and let me first be specific about what I take to be (some of) his great insights about moral education. For example, Kongzi tells us that when the ruler of a state is

virtuous, its inhabitants will be influenced to become (more) virtuous themselves, and there will be no need for laws governing people's behavior. And although the part about laws may be something of an exaggeration (laws are needed to coordinate behavior, even when everyone is benevolent and good-willed: e. g., laws governing the side of the street cars or oxcarts should go on), the idea that a benevolent ruler will influence his subjects in a positive moral way seems to anticipate Hume's idea (which he in turn got originally from Malebranche) that the attitudes and habits of those around us tend, subliminally or osmotically, to seep into us too. This holds particularly for people we love and are grateful to (a point Hume and Malebranche never specifically made), and Kongzi's example of the benevolent ruler seems to illustrate the same idea. To the extent he is benevolent, we will love or at least be grateful to him, and such feelings (together perhaps with facts about his power over us—but those facts can to a substantial extent funnel into causes/reasons for greater gratitude) facilitate the empathic taking in of the ruler's attitudes and motivational dispositions (his benevolence). Kongzi anticipates these later, Western ideas by two millennia, and he may well be the first person on this planet ever to talk about (what we would call) the empathic contagion of attitudes and dispositions—in relation to rulers or more generally.

But like the Confucians and neo-Confucians and new Confucians, et al., who came after him, Kongzi also believed in moral self-cultivation, believed that people could or can fundamentally transform or shape themselves in moral terms.10 And although most Confucians think of moral self-cultivation as a process, Kongzi at one point tells us that we can become moral(ly good or decent) simply by willing hard enough to be so. (However, in another passage, he tells us that some people can never become virtuous gentlemen, so it is somewhat difficult to know exactly what Kongzi thinks about this matter.) If becoming virtuous through an act of will were (ever) possible, it might not count as moral self-cultivation, or we could call it instantaneous moral self-cultivation just to mark off what is at issue here

from less extreme ideas about moral self-transformation. But is it correct to assume that someone could will herself or himself, successfully, to be a moral person?

To many of us nowadays this will seem somewhat naïve. We know enough philosophy and psychology to assure ourselves that someone cannot just will to love his mother-in-law or the New York Yankees and have that willing be successful either immediately or in due course. And why should it be any different with strongly willing to be a moral person? To be sure, and as I mentioned earlier, the person who feels bad enough about various episodes in which he harmed other people can build up a resistance to further harming that is tantamount to a desire to be a better person than he has previously been—perhaps even to a desire to be (in certain important respects) a good person. And such desire is part of the process through which people become more empathically sensitive to the needs and experiences of other people and therefore morally better in altruistic terms. (I shall have much more to say about the desire to be a better person when we talk about Kantian views of moral self-improvement and about the recent psychology literature as it bears on the truth of those views.) But Kongzi isn't imagining a background of guilt or bad feeling of the kind that occurs in and through the process of inductive discipline as the basis or launching pad for someone's willing to be a better person. He doesn't explain what could possibly *motivate* someone to will to be a better person. And as I have indicated he says nothing by way of explaining why we should think such willing, were it ever to occur, is likely to be effective.

Of course, it is easy enough for us to raise such questions: what we now know about social science and about the conceptual issues surrounding the will or willing can make us question what Kongzi may have taken for granted or on faith. But that is just my point. Kongzi was operating in ignorance of a great deal of subsequent philosophical and social-scientific work, and the latter gives us reason to question whether moral self-cultivation can (successfully) occur in the instantaneous or short-term way that

Kongzi at one point suggests is possible and recommends to others. (He elsewhere grants that he himself took many many years to become as virtuous as he later became.)

Another theme in Kongzi's treatment of moral self-cultivation is the usefulness and efficacy of rituals, or rites, in effecting moral (self-)transformation. And many of his followers lay similar stress on rites or rituals as helpful to moral learning or education. But although I know this places me in opposition to a whole ethical tradition and practically to a whole culture or civilization, I am somewhat skeptical about the role of ritual. Of course, rituals serve a great number of social and individual functions, and some or many of these are very useful. But I wonder how many rituals actually help to make people better as people (as opposed to keeping society within certain bounds and allowing it to continue and flourish in its own distinctive, though not necessarily uncriticizable, terms).

Take ritualized or institutionalized athletic contests. Kongzi seems to have thought that such contests take aggressive energy away from more destructive or divisive activities, and he may have been right about this.11 But does an interest in and devotion to athletic contests do anything more than make people temporarily less aggressive? Does it transform them in such a way that they later become less aggressive and *less in need* of athletic contexts to draw off their aggressive energies? I see no reason to think so, though, again, we would need to appeal to social science (or the science of biology?) to help us with this question. (Similar problems will later be raised for Kant's theory of moral self-improvement.)

And consider other kinds of ritualized behavior, cases where the term "ritual" actually seems more apt and appropriate than it does in reference to most athletic contests. Imagine, for example, that there are certain ceremonies that parents take their children to and that require the children to sit still for a while and to take in certain aspects or elements of their own religious or ethical culture. Kongzi and his followers seem to have thought that such rituals were/are likely to curb children's bad habits, make them more patient, more willing to cooperate in social institutions and enterprises. But I don't know. If

the children are made to sit through the rituals, perhaps they will resent what they have to do or go through, and perhaps they will "itch" not to have to do what they are being required by their parents to do. Maybe they will try to avoid such rituals whenever they can get away with it, and maybe the rituals, rather than increasing their patience, will make them less patient with what life requires of them. Who knows? The Confucians assume that the rituals will have various good effects on the character of those who participate in them, but with children at least the participation is typically not voluntary. The parents exert various forms of power assertion in order to get their children to attend church or regularly go through traditional and institutionalized social ceremonies, and the literature of psychology suggests that power assertion *isn't* very effective in making people more caring and altruistic—and may actually tend to have the opposite effect (children can *resent* their parents or the priests who force them to sit through, go through, various potentially tedious ceremonies).

But I am not saying—*not saying*—that all ritual is morally useless (to society) or useless for the purpose of morally transforming or educating individuals. Ritual as such and most rituals that actually exist, East *and* West, seem to me to be pretty useless for purposes of moral transformation—they don't help people become more caring or altruistic people. But I don't think this is necessarily true of all rites and rituals, and the potential example that convinced me of this was pointed out by P. J. Ivanhoe in a discussion at the Neo-Confucian Mini-Conference held at the APA Pacific Division meetings in Vancouver some years back. P. J. noted the possibility of a family ritual whereby, every night at dinner, everyone is asked, not to say grace, but to think for a minute about all the people whose work or labor helped make that particular meal possible. This is reminiscent, I think, of inductive discipline, and it strikes me as a fairly realistic way of making children more grateful to those who have helped to make their (presumably good or adequate) lives possible. And it will also, I think, help the adults of the family keep hold of their gratitude to others in a way that they might otherwise not. And as I see it, these effects needn't be evanescent and mercurial, but could realistically be supposed to make people more grateful

and caring (gratitude is a form of altruism) over the longer term. So I don't object to ritual as such, nor do I want to say that rituals can't have a good effect on longer-term moral character. But I do think most rituals don't fulfill that function, and I believe Confucianism has overestimated the general potential of rituals (as such) to promote greater individual moral virtue.

Of course, certain rituals directly *express* moral concern, even if they don't promote a higher degree or level of altruism. Funeral services are not supposed to contain moments or aspects of levity, and this is conventionally accepted as a way of being kind to the feelings of those who are mourning. Indeed, the requirement that people attend the funeral ceremonies of those they have been close to constitutes its own kind of socialized kindness. If a grieving widower is socially coerced into attending his wife's funeral, he will be less likely to sink into total lethargy and depression and will to some extent be aided in the process of recovering from his loss. This is, I think, a kind thing for society to do, even though (and perhaps because) the widower may feel the burden of attending the funeral as almost unbearable. So rituals have their place, and it is, to a substantial extent, a dignified and useful place. But we shouldn't then assume, as Kongzi and the Confucians have done, that rituals are typically a path to greater individual moral virtue. The case for that conclusion seems to me to be pretty much unmade, and I have offered you a number of reasons for thinking that such a conclusion is, in fact, mistaken. And all this also bears on the issue of moral self-cultivation, because if rituals are thought to be morally educative pretty much in general, one can then imagine that one can (deliberately) make oneself a better person by attending and participating in various ceremonies and rituals. But if, for the reasons I have given, rituals don't serve this moral-educative function very often, then one way of trying to cultivate or shape oneself morally is blocked off as unrealistic and unhelpful—and we have added to our reasons for thinking that moral self-cultivation isn't as important or as useful an idea, as viable an ideal or practice, as Confucianism has generally assumed it is.

But let's consider some other, later Confucians in relation to the issues we have raised about moral self-cultivation. For example, Mengzi (Mencius) thinks human nature is fundamentally good, and in this he differs from Kongzi, who thinks or seems to think of human nature as morally neutral. But this disagreement appears to me to be tangential to the question of the value and validity of moral self-improvement or moral self-cultivation. Even if we are to some extent already good, we can become much much better, and Mengzi thinks one can sensibly and usefully work on one's own overall self-improvement (though he doesn't think it can occur all at once through a single effort of will or commitment or even very quickly: it is more like growing and tending to plants). Mengzi also has something like our notion of empathy (see the *Mencius* 7A4—though some scholars regard this passage as an interpolation from a later period) and thinks we have an inborn tendency toward compassion and benevolence that it is possible to cultivate (see *Mencius* 2A6, for example). In these ways, his ideas seem to move in the direction of moral sentimentalism and the empathic approach to moral education I have been defending, and to do so more than anything that can be found in the *Analects*. But he certainly doesn't tie his views about moral education or moral self-cultivation to empathic processes in the way or ways I have been suggesting, and as far as I can tell he offers us no guidance beyond the things we have already spoken of for how large-scale or overall self-cultivation can be feasible. Thus even if we are innately good in the sense of having inborn benevolent impulses and a capacity for empathy, it doesn't automatically follow that we will desire to become *better* people and deliberately take (effective) steps to do so, and Mengzi's picture of moral self-improvement is, therefore, radically incomplete. Nor does it really help to bring in the idea of extending our benevolence beyond a narrower circle to ever larger ones. Mengzi mentions this possibility or opportunity (*Mencius* 1A7 and 7A15), and the idea of such extension is often relied on in later Confucian (and neo-Confucian, etc.) discussions of moral self-cultivation, but a plausible account of why one would *want* to extend one's benevolence is never really offered, and, in addition, we are never really told how the psychological process of extension actually

takes place—e. g., by what psychologically familiar mechanisms. (I shall return to these themes in what follows.)

But let me be clear. In a recent discussion of Mengzian extension, Bryan Van Norden describes in interesting detail how other people can get one to be more consistent in one's emotional concerns.12 And this is very much in keeping with what we saw earlier in regard to Nathan and King David. Indeed, and as I have already indicated, teachers and works of literature can get one to care more about some previously unfamiliar category of people (or animals) than one had previously. But Van Norden's discussion of extension relies at every turn on the intervention of others and isn't really a description of what one would colloquially call a process or processes of self-cultivation or overall self-shaping. (Van Norden himself doesn't, I think, sufficiently appreciate this—see his p. 245.) So I think my initial point remains. If we are really talking about self-cultivation, about taking charge of one's own overall and/or radical moral improvement, it is not easy to come up with real-life examples. It is still difficult to see why an otherwise decent or virtuous individual would on their own want to extend their concern to people or beings they are not yet concerned about, and it is also difficult to see how someone could bring about such a large-scale change in himself or herself largely through his or her own efforts.

However, in contrast with Mengzi, Xunzi thinks that human nature is bad, and he (for that reason) places more emphasis on ways in which one can be morally taught or improved by others and less emphasis on moral self-cultivation than Mengzi does. But he does stress the importance of having knowledge of the Confucian classics as a basis for moral improvement, and subsequently Zhu Xi also argued that a deliberate and long-term immersion in the classic texts of Confucianism (together with attention to how the lessons of those texts are illustrated or exemplified in one's own life and the world around one) can help make or shape one into a better person. This is something that Wang Yang-Ming would call into question, and I think we should pause for a moment to consider how plausible this view

is. Exactly *how* is the knowledge of the classics supposed to make one better? From everything I have read, those who have recommended such a course of study as a means to moral self-improvement don't tell us anything very specific about how—in psychologically realistic and understandable terms—the improvement actually occurs. So part of what I am saying here is that if Chinese thinkers want to convince us that overall moral self-improvement is possible through a reading of classical texts, they need to spell out the details and the mechanisms of that process in a way that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been done.

And, frankly, I don't believe that this can at all easily be done. Reading certain works of literature that immerse the reader in the sorrows of certain other people (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a good example) can make and, we know, has made a great difference to how sensitive those readers are to other people's sufferings or difficulties. And if the idea is that the Confucian classics can do this sort of thing for us, well, then, what is being said makes a lot of sense to me (though I don't know enough to judge whether those classics contain anything like the empathic moral lessons of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). But here is the question that bothers me. I can understand why the Caucasian married to a Korean-American would undertake a course of study relating to Korean history and literature—I can see and I spelled out the motive in that particular case, and in the light of the given motive and the appropriateness of the readings, one can understand pretty well how the husband in question could become more sensitive to things Korean and could eventually, therefore, count as having done things to (successfully) improve himself as a person.

But even if the Chinese classics contain stories and examples that can help sensitize us morally, what is the motive for actually reading them? If the idea is that one is assigned these books in school or university, then there is an element of power assertion that can make one wonder just how much the student really will learn. And in any case even if one assumes (as I think is plausible) that the student can

learn moral lessons in such cases, the learning will certainly not count as an instance of moral *self*-cultivation or *self*-education.13 But perhaps the idea is that everyone wants to improve morally, so that if one realizes that the classics can improve one in that way, one has an obvious motive to immerse oneself in them (though one may have other motives that work against this motive to some extent).14

However, for reasons explained earlier, I just don't get this. After one has hurt someone and had that fact placed very vividly before one, one may well feel bad and want to be better in certain specific ways (having to do with the hurt or harm one has brought about). But the general desire to be a morally better person: where is that supposed to come from? We know that people like comfort, pleasure, and power and that they will do things in the service of those motives. But who says we know that people want to be morally better and to improve themselves if possible? Some, many people are *just not like that*, and it should be clear that the desire for moral improvement and/or self-improvement can't simply be taken for granted. It needs to be explained, psychologically explained, in clear and convincing terms.

Now in fact the Confucian tradition seems to *have* such an explanation. It can say and has said that the desire for moral self-improvement may come from our admiration for certain traits and for certain individuals who seem to us to exemplify those traits. (See, e. g., *Analects* 4.17, 7.22, and 7.24; but this is a theme in much of the subsequent literature of Confucianism). So let's explore this new and final way in which one might try to defend Confucian ideas about moral self-cultivation. As we have seen, Confucians often think of literature or their own literary tradition as a basis for such self-cultivation, but there is also some tendency within Confucianism to think of certain living or historical exemplars as helping with, or even essential to, this moral process. And, of course, literature deals with or brings in exemplars all the time, so there is considerable overlap between the use/influence/guidance of literature and the use/influence/guidance of exemplars in helping to create or develop (morally) more virtuous individuals. However, by the same token, many of the problems I have just been raising about

self-cultivation through literary texts also apply in regard to exemplars, and rather than repeat those arguments, let me, rather, say some things that seem to apply in the first instance or most directly to the idea of moral self-cultivation through exemplars.

First, admirable exemplars (or, for that matter, the admirable traits they exemplify) have to be brought to our attention, we have to learn about them somehow, and it doesn't make sense to suppose that people go around looking for exemplars to emulate. If they did, and if they then proceeded to emulate those exemplars, that would be a process of self-cultivation in the fullest sense. But as I indicated, this is not how actual people learn whatever they learn from exemplars, so even if it is possible to cultivate one's own virtue on the basis of some exemplar one has learned about, there is outside influence in the process considered as a whole. As with the example of the man married to a Korean-American woman, any self-cultivation that occurs via exemplars has to be initiated via outside influences, and that initiation will not be an instance of self-cultivation.

But I don't think Confucians would be terribly bothered by this last consideration. No one thinks self-cultivation can take place in someone who has never felt any outside influences—we all have to learn language, motors skills, and the like from others in order for most moral learning to take place. The real question is whether, once one encounters or is shown an exemplar, a process of emulation can understandably take place along lines that can be reasonably described as moral self-cultivation. If acquaintance with the model or exemplar influences someone via the kind of unconscious or non-deliberate osmosis (of empathic concern) I described earlier, then the process isn't sufficiently deliberate or self-initiated to count as self-cultivation or self-shaping, so the Confucian or anyone else who thinks the emulation of a moral model can be pursued in a deliberate and self-conscious way has to come up with a psychologically realistic way to explain how this latter might or does sometimes happen.

Nor is it good enough, in this connection, simply to say that one's admiration for the exemplar is what gets one to emulate them in a deliberate way. In my recent book *Moral Sentimentalism* I explained how children who have been taught via inductive discipline and who have imbibed a certain amount of empathic altruism from those around them can come to admire morally altruistic actions and people.15 But we still need to understand better than in fact I think we do how admiration can lead to emulation. After all, I may morally admire the person who gives one of their kidneys to a total stranger, but if I am as much attached (sorry!) to my own kidneys as most people are, I wouldn't want to be or become such a person. My present prudence or self-concern would undercut any desire to be like such a person. More generally, why should someone who is, say, already fairly altruistic (and empathic) want to embody the greater altruism (and empathic tendency) of some highly admirable exemplar? (Richard McCarty first brought this question to my attention many years ago.)16

It is not enough to say that we will naturally or normally want to become more like the highly moral exemplar because we realize that we will be better off, have a better life, if we do that. There are many reasons for doubting whether the person who is morally best or better than others will usually have a better life than those who are immoral or simply fall short of great moral excellence, though you may be happy to learn that I am not going to try to discuss those reasons here. But, more relevantly perhaps, one needs to ask oneself how a desire to become morally better as a means to having a better life can actually lead to being morally better. If one's primary motive is and continues to be the ostensibly egoistic desire for a better life for oneself, then how can that represent, embody, or launch a *morally improved* state of personal character? And it is just not clear how the primary desire for a better life for oneself will eventually yield to (or turn into?) the kind of intrinsic desire to help people and treat them justly that we almost all think is essential to being a moral person.17

But all right, then. Let's assume that admiration in itself gives one *some motive* to emulate a moral exemplar, a motive that needn't at all be egoistic, but that may counteracted in cases like that of the kidney donation where or when the prudential risks of moral improvement can be considered too great. One will still have to ask how such a motive can initiate or lead to a process of moral self-improvement, and it is not easy to see how to answer this question. Wanting to be more like an admired moral model, do I simply perform actions like those I know the model has performed, actions presumably motivated by a desire to emulate that the model himself or herself wasn't motivated by? And how does this process lead me—and what reason do I really have to think it will lead me—to eventually develop the admired motives that the admired model originally acted from? Perhaps, then, I reason that if I read the Confucian classics that the model himself read, that will make me more like him—but I will also have to recognize that many people have read those classics without becoming like the model, and surely that should make me wonder whether reading those classics is the best way to go about improving myself morally. And similar thoughts are applicable to any attempt to improve oneself via rites or rituals.

Of course, I may know of particular literary works, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that have a track record of improving people morally (it helped stoke anti-slavery feeling in pre-Civil War America) and then start deliberately reading those works; and in such a case I will certainly resemble the American who read Korean literature in order to become more sensitive to and appreciative of Korean people and Korean culture. But I don't think those who have spoken of moral self-cultivation have recommended anything as specific or focused as what I am now suggesting, so, once again, I am saying that the traditions that emphasize moral self-cultivation would need to be much more specific than they have been about how such a thing can realistically be expected to occur. And can anyone deliver on such a requirement?18

Up till now, I believe Confucian views about moral self-cultivation or overall self-shaping have been left pretty much without a realistic psychological foothold within the overall enterprise of (better)

understanding how moral education and moral development more generally can and actually do occur. Influential contemporary Confucians or Confucian scholars like Tu Wei-ming and P. J. Ivanhoe seem to believe in the promise and possibilities of moral self-cultivation just as much as the early Confucians did.19 But my conclusions from everything that has been said here are, first, that present-day Confucian and other ethicists should *stop* being so preoccupied with (their ideas about) moral *self*-cultivation and focus more of their attention on moral education *in general*; and, second, that discussions of moral self-cultivation from a Confucian perspective ought to be more skeptical than they have been.20

But this still leaves the door open to Western ideas about self-cultivation and self-shaping that, as I have suggested, don't find any parallel within the Confucian or (as far as I know) within any other Eastern philosophical/ethical tradition.21 (Note that I am not and shall not be assuming that deliberate and radical moral self-improvement cannot involve substantial help from others.) So I think we now need to turn our attention to the somewhat different considerations and factors that Aristotle, Kant, and others in the West have emphasized as the basis for shaping ourselves overall into morally good or virtuous individuals. The argument for the impossibility of human moral desert/responsibility has to demonstrate (the unfortunate conclusion) that these other considerations and factors no more allow for overall moral self-shaping than anything we have uncovered within the long tradition(s) of Confucianism.22

Footnotes

1. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and moralization: the cognitive-developmental approach," in T. Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Moral Behavior: Theory, Research, and Social Issues*, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, pp. 31-53. Kohlberg probably stresses the cognitive aspects of moral development more than Kant did, but Kant doesn't offer anything as specifically developmental as Kohlberg does. Also, Kohlberg sometimes shows the influence of John Rawls more than he does the influence of Kant or Piaget.

2. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, esp. ch. 8.

3. In *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

4. See his "Virtue and Reason," reprinted in R. Crisp and M. Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

5. There is generally thought to be a distinction between altruism and the desire to act justly, but I think the difference between these motives is much less than is commonly imagined, and I have argued for that conclusion at great length in my book *Moral Sentimentalism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010). In any event, it is difficult for the rationalist to account for moral motivations of any kind, and if empathy can help us understand how to make people more altruistic and how they *become* more altruistic, that will, I think, give us more than other accounts of moral education have given us.

6. See Hoffman's *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

6a. As we shall see later, in chapter 4, induction also contrasts with the kind of parental anger or blaming or shaming that sometimes occurs in response to a child's misdeeds. There is empirical evidence that such reactions are not morally helpful.

7. On Aristotelian moral education see Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in A. O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

8. Power assertion appeals to egoistic fear(s) rather than to our budding capacities for empathy with others, and even though (as Hoffman points out) every parent will sometimes resort to power assertion with a child, the use of induction and the resultant empathic modeling effects that accompany it seem much more efficacious in creating genuine altruism. On this point see Nancy Eisenberg, *The Caring Child*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. And for further doubts about how sheer habituation can alter motivation and effect a change for the better in moral character/virtue, see H. Hartshorne and M. May's *Studies in the Nature of Character*, in three volumes, NY: Macmillan, 1928-30.

9. My example here is adapted from one that Brad Wilburn uses for a somewhat different purpose in "Moral Self-Improvement" in Wilburn, ed., *Moral Cultivation: Essays on the Development of Character and Virtue*, NY: Lexington Books, 2010, pp. 70ff.

9a. Even if both the factory owner and the man married to a Korean-American woman learn a moral lesson from and are morally improved as a result of the look on someone's face, the cases differ because the latter deliberately reads a lot of Korean history and literature as a means of improving himself and the former's moral turmoil after his visit to the factory isn't an instance of deliberately improving himself. The factory owner reflects on his own moral failings as a result of what he learns form that look in the factory, but there is no reason to think that the process of reflection is deliberately undertaken for the purpose of self-improvement—rather, it is *impelled* by the experience in the factory and *results* in moral improvement. And that difference makes it idiomatic to speak of what the American married to

the Korean-American woman does (when he reads the books) as (deliberate) self-cultivation, but makes it quite a stretch to speak that way about what the factory owner does when he reflects on his shortcomings.

10. Here I am paraphrasing what P. J. Ivanhoe says about Confucianism and moral self-cultivation in his book *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (note the lack of a hyphen, though), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, second edition, 2000, p. xiv.

11. See *Analects* 3.7, for example, and Ivanhoe, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

12. See Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007, esp. pp. 234-46. Van Norden's discussion draws significantly on earlier work on the subject of extension to be found in various chapters of Xiusheng Liu and P. J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002.

13. I earlier described the need for schools or parents to expose children to literature, films, etc., that depict suffering (and joy) in ways that can sensitize them to the needs/desires of people outside their immediate circle of acquaintance, and what I have just said in the main text indicates that there will often (though not always) be an element of power assertion involved in exposing/sensitizing children in this way. Hoffman notes that even induction has aspects of power assertion (the parent has to get her child to pay attention to what she is trying to teach her), but he argues that there is much less power assertion in such contexts than in situations where parents implicitly or explicitly threaten their children with coercive force or punishment. Obviously, then, schools and parents seeking to expose their children to literature, television programs, internet sites, etc., that will sensitize them to the problems and needs of others need to minimize the coercive aspects of their doing so. But with a certain degree of cleverness and with the cooperation of natural childhood curiosity, I think they can usually manage this pretty effectively.

14. Kongzi, Wang Yang-Ming, and other Confucians (as well as many writers in the West) often say that we need to *work constantly* to root out our evil or selfish impulses and that we have to strongly *resolve* to carry out this work. But, again, I wonder where the motive and energy for all this are supposed to come from. In fact, the sheer obsessiveness (or *drivenness*) of the constant preoccupation with self-improvement that various Confucians have recommended strikes me as very suspect. Such constant preoccupation seems a sign of inordinate personal anxiety rather than any sort of helpful path toward moral improvement.

15. *Op. cit.*, chs. 1-4. That discussion leaves room for the possibility of someone's consciously emulating certain moral exemplars and describes how such emulation might actually occur (p. 19n.); but the kind of emulation I describe occurs in the context of inductive discipline and doesn't imply or assume any sort of self-cultivation.

16. In his "The Paradox of Virtue" (in Bryan van Norden, ed., *The Ways of Confucianism*, La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1996), David Nivison speaks of a paradox of virtue according to which we seem to need to be already virtuous in order to want to become and succeed in becoming virtuous. This is a variant on the problem that McCarty earlier raised with me, and we will return to Nivison's paradox in our next chapter when we discuss the desire to overcome various temptations.

17. For interesting discussion of the emulation of exemplars in relation to (Confucian ideas about) moral self-cultivation and the desire to lead a better life, see Amy Olberding's *Moral Exemplars in the* Analects*: The Good Person is* That, NY: Routledge, 2012. But I don't think Olberding offers any answers to the questions/problems I am raising here, and, from what I can tell, the general tradition in Confucian studies that emphasizes moral exemplars doesn't offer any satisfactory answers either.

18. Perhaps one can best achieve similarity to an admired moral exemplar by just choosing to be around them—to soak up their attitudes and motives. This might work better than imitating their actual moral

actions or reading in the Chinese classics. But if this is what Confucianism should focus on, then it is important to say so and to back up this specific recommendation with psychological theory and studies. And in addition if one stays around someone in order to soak in their moral excellence and their excellence eventually does (to switch metaphors) rub off on them, has one shaped oneself into a better person or has one just deliberately put oneself in the way of *being shaped or transformed* into a better person? Arguably, the latter is the more plausible conclusion, so once again the idea of shaping oneself into a good or virtuous person gets no foothold in what people actually can do.

19. See Ivanhoe, *op. cit.*, and Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought*, Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979.

20. I have not denied that Confucians or people generally can believe that they are improving themselves morally by participating in rituals, reading the classics, and/or copying the behavior of certain exemplars, or that they can *attempt* to improve themselves morally by doing these things. Rather, I am saying that these beliefs and efforts are more psychologically and practically problematic than advocates of moral self-cultivation have imagined (and here I include Western thinkers like Kant and not just the typical Confucian). Bringing in empathy can help make moral change and development understandable, but to a very large extent those who have spoken of self-cultivation haven't appreciated the need to appeal to empathy. But this then points to another lesson of the present discussion. Improving one's knowledge of some computer language or of ancient history is something one can undertake on one's own to a large extent. And I have no wish to deny the possibility of such intellectual self-cultivation; and, of course, one can also cultivate one's own athletic skills, etc. But these forms of non-moral self-improvement don't centrally involve (the strengthening of) empathy, and one's motive to learn the computer language may simply be the desire to get a high-paying job that requires one to know it. Self-improvement in technical or athletic skills can (often) be understood in strictly

egoistic terms and is, therefore, not motivationally problematic in the way deliberate moral self-improvement is. As I mentioned in the text, above, it is hard to see how one can become morally better, or more empathic, out of egoistic motives, and we also need to become clearer about how or even whether deliberately emulating the actions (or responses?) of morally admired exemplars can transform one's motives into those of the exemplars. These are just two reasons why moral self-cultivation is so much more psychologically and conceptually problematic than is the deliberate cultivation of one's own athletic or linguistic skills. (Some recent discussions of moral self-cultivation assume, and are based on, an analogy with the cultivation of skills that doesn't really reckon with the essential motivational differences between skills and virtues.)

Finally, let me point out that I have nowhere supposed that moral self-cultivation has to take place independently of the help or influence of others. Someone teaching herself (e. g.) French grammar may get advice and help from others along the way, but still the person can be said to be teaching themselves (about) French grammar because they have taken overall charge of this educative process. I think there is nothing analogous in the case of moral education. The Confucians assumed we tend to need outside help in becoming more virtuous, but many also thought one could take charge of this process for oneself, and I don't think they give us a realistic picture of how this could actually, successfully, happen.

21. Various recent scientific studies (see, e. g., the work of Antoine Lutz) have indicated that "master meditators" with at least 10,000 hours of meditation practice show more empathic arousal at the distress of others than those who are just learning to meditate. This seems to suggest that meditation may be an effective mode of moral self-cultivation, but I am not sure how much aid and comfort this gives to Western and Confucian thinking about moral self-cultivation or self-education. If one has to train for a Buddhist way of life in order to become a better person, this may undercut the idea that

moral self-cultivation is possible within a familiar and otherwise ordinary human life. And since the typical Buddhist is motivated by a desire to escape the painful cycle of lives, how altruistic is the motivation behind the greater sensitivity to others that prolonged meditation is supposed to confer? Moreover, that sensitivity is purchased, presumably, at the expense of the usual human emphasis on close family relationships over more distant human relations—one is becoming compassionate (indiscriminately) with *all* of misguided and suffering humanity. And if one thinks morality requires special concern with certain intimates, it is not clear that the enhanced general sensitivity counts as a form of moral improvement, much less self-improvement. (Also, is it empathic to cast aside what so many of us think is really valuable about the satisfactions we seek and often attain in our own lives?) So I think the recent studies may not much affect what I have been saying in the main body of this paper.

22. The reader may wonder why I have emphasized the development of altruism rather than the development of a sense of justice (or of deontological obligation) as a basis for moral improvement and virtue. But everyone agrees at the very least that altruism is an important element in morality or moral virtue, so if we cannot shape our own altruism, the claim that we can shape our overall moral character becomes very tenuous. Also, a sentimentalist like myself thinks that the motivations behind strict adherence to deontological requirements and the sense of justice involve empathy and are no more subject to our deliberate control than anything having to do with sheer altruism. I have defended these ideas in my book *Moral Sentimentalism* (Oxford, 2010), but, as I said a moment ago, even if one doesn't conceive deontology and justice along sentimentalist lines, altruism is a major element in moral virtue and if it cannot be successfully self-cultivated, if one cannot shape oneself into an overall altruistic person, then moral self-shaping fades to the vanishing point as a social psychological possibility. And then the unfortunate conclusion that we cannot be morally deserving or responsible would seem to follow.

Chapter 3 --- Aristotle and Kant on Moral Self-Shaping

We have seen what the Confucian tradition has to say about the desirability and feasibility of moral self-cultivation; and I have argued that that tradition doesn't offer us any clear way in which human moral self-cultivation can rise to the level of self-shaping that, according to Pico della Mirandola and most of the rest of us, is a necessary condition of human moral desert and moral responsibility.1 But now we have to take a look at what Western philosophers have had to say about the modes and possibilities of moral self-improvement and self-shaping. And I believe the most promising ideas in this direction can be found in Aristotle and Kant. I am going to argue that what Aristotle and Kant have to say about this issue is more a matter of wishful thinking than of realistic psychological understanding, but of course Aristotle and Kant worked during a period when social science and academic psychology in particular had yet to gain a foothold in our culture. It isn't surprising that, in the absence of empirical evidence to the contrary, they should have held that we can determine our moral destinies in a way that allows for human moral responsibility and desert. And it is not only not surprising, but makes a great deal of philosophical sense.

Our society/culture advocates and insists on conformity to certain moral standards, and as socialized and cognizant individuals we most of us have strong moral intuitions. And, having such intuitions, we most of us want to preserve moral stability as much as possible in our culture. We don't want people to feel free of their obligations, free to hurt or harm others without any sense of guilt. But to deny the objectivity of morality is to leave us and society open to more of the morally outrageous things that already occur in our social and international world. Morality is a slim reed to base social order on, but it does serve as a barrier of sorts against things getting worse. And things might well get worse if people thought morality was totally subjective and dependent on our own tastes and inclinations. So someone

who values social order and harmony and has ideals of justice and compassion would seem to have reason to try to justify, rather than reject, our widespread antecedent sense that there is such a thing, really is such a thing, as moral right and wrong. And, of course, there is the further fact that the principle of methodological conservatism that operates in science and tells the scientist not to too quickly abandon received views or theories in favor of new ones seems have some (methodological) force beyond the sphere of science. In which case, again, morally-minded philosophers like Kant and Aristotle have or would have (methodological) reason to reject, if at all possible, views or theories that challenge our antecedent and widespread opinions about the reality of moral right and wrong, reason to try to show that objective morality is possible.

But similar thoughts may apply to our commonsense ideas about moral desert and responsibility. We believe in these ideas, and philosophers like Aristotle and Kant ostensibly also think that things might be much worse if we gave up on them. Now perhaps things wouldn't in fact be worse if we gave up our ideas about moral responsibility for a more medical or psychiatric model of (some) human immoral and illegal activities. Certainly, hard incompatibilists like Waller and Pereboom think we could learn to live without these notions, and it might easily be thought that if we did, our society would be less punitive and more humane toward mentally disturbed individuals who don't meet today's definitions of legal insanity--and that this would be a good thing. But such thinking was pretty clearly not available to Aristotle, and although Kant wrote at a time when Spinoza's views were fairly well known, it would have gone against everything Kant thought about human dignity to have to acknowledge that we aren't morally responsible for anything and that it would be better for society if we acknowledged that.

So I think the kinds of arguments Aristotle and Kant give have a certain initial (moral and theoretical) value; I can see why, in the absence of better social scientific knowledge, one would be inclined to argue

as they did. But nonetheless I think their arguments for moral responsibility based on our freedom to shape our own moral character(s) are very deficient, and deficient for reasons that to a large extent emerge out of what recent social science and psychology have learned about human nature. And let me begin by discussing what I take to be the problems with Aristotle's approach to these issues.

1

In our last chapter I had a good deal to say about Aristotle's ideas concerning moral education, but there is more to be said, because our previous discussion focused mainly on Aristotle's views about how children morally learn from their parents and didn't take up the issue of whether someone acting on their own can make themselves into an ethically better or worse person and thereby be or become responsible for their own state of virtue or vice, their own moral character. But the two discussions have at least this much in common: what Aristotle says about the moral training of children and what he says about our responsibility for our own eventual moral character both depend crucially on the idea of the repetition of desired or desirable actions, on habituation.

In Book III (especially chapter 5) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle directly discusses the question of (moral) responsibility for states of virtue and vice and for actions arising out of such states of character. He says that when we make voluntary choices, we are responsible for what we have done, can be praised or blamed for the actions we have chosen to perform, and he goes on to claim that the repeated choice, say, of unjust actions will turn someone into an unjust person, someone with a settled disposition or habit of acting unjustly. He adds (W. D. Ross translation) that ignorance of this last fact "is the mark of a thoroughly senseless person." In other words, every intelligent person knows that if they act in a certain way all the time (or on many occasions and without ever acting in a contrary fashion), they will develop into a person with the habit of acting that way. So Aristotle holds that when someone

has made themselves unjust in this kind of way and with this kind of antecedent knowledge, their resultant unjustness is voluntary and can therefore be blamed. To be sure, and as Aristotle himself points out, once someone has made themselves unjust, they may have little or no voluntary choice about whether they will continue to be that way.2 But this doesn't have to mean that the choices such a person makes at that point aren't voluntary as choices.

Now in chapter 2 I argued that if someone's parents use power assertion to make them, say, attend church every Sunday, this may well not result in a settled habit that will survive once they no longer are under their parents' control. (In fact, they may itch to stop going to church as soon as they can get away with it.) But one could claim that what one does under parental control or supervision is not really or entirely voluntary, and it would be possible then to claim, on behalf of what Aristotle says in Book III, chapter 5, of the NE, that what is true of involuntary choices needn't at all hold for voluntary ones. Even if choices made under strict parental supervision arguably don't lay down a settled habit, that may be because the choices aren't voluntary, and in that case, since the choices Aristotle in Book III speaks of as laying down or causing a habit are entirely voluntary, they may establish a habit even if less voluntary choices do not.

But is Aristotle right to say this sort of thing? He says that every sensible person knows that their voluntary choices will eventually turn into something settled and unchangeable, but does every such person really know this. I tend to doubt it. In *The Methods of Ethics* (7th edition, p. 67n) Henry Sidgwick says that someone who believes they are free, will sometimes rationalize themselves into yielding to a certain kind of temptation (that they wish to be no longer subject to) on the grounds that they can *just as easily* start acting differently the next time they are tempted. Now you can say with Aristotle that such people aren't sensible or intelligent, but so many of us fall under this description that I think one

should hesitate to agree with Aristotle about the obviousness of his claim that free choices lay down firm habits.

That claim, moreover, is not only not obvious but actually, and from a certain social scientific standpoint, quite questionable. In the twentieth century, psychology as a field worked very hard on and with what is standardly called the "law of effect," according to which behavior that is rewarded in a given circumstance is more likely to repeat itself in similar circumstances in the future than it was likely to occur before it had ever been rewarded. The behaviorists relied on this idea (of course, it is vague because of the vagueness attaching to the notion of similarity and also, perhaps, to the idea of a reward). But the law of effect can certainly make sense apart from the (other) assumptions of behaviorism, and it is in any event clear that Aristotle's argument about the results of voluntary actions doesn't appeal to this law. He doesn't say that certain voluntary actions become more likely to repeat themselves if they are rewarded. Rather, and in a more blanket fashion, he says that they are more likely to occur and become a strong habit once enough of that kind of voluntary action (on the part of the given agent) has occurred.

And this idea corresponds, not to the law of effect, but to another "law" that behaviorists and others have spoken and written about, the so-called "law of exercise." According to this law behavior that wasn't particularly likely to occur in a given kind of circumstance c becomes more likely to occur in similar circumstances in the future (simply) as a result of having occurred once (or perhaps several times) in c. This is very close to what Aristotle is saying and what he says every sensible person knows, but in fact psychologists have never plumped firmly in favor of the law of exercise in the way they pretty much have done in regard to the law of effect. And the fact is that it is very difficult to be sure, either on experimental grounds or on commonsense grounds, that voluntary (or involuntary) choices tend to

propel themselves forward into the future as habits or dispositions to act and to do so independently of being rewarded.

This has three theoretical consequences. One doesn't, to begin with, have to be silly or unintelligent to doubt the law of exercise or to doubt what Aristotle says about sheer action tending to become habit. Aristotle says you do, but he seems mistaken about this. But then second, and more significantly for present purposes, even if voluntary actions do tend to yield habits, the habit thus arrived at won't have to count as voluntary on Aristotelian grounds to the extent the person who develops that habit had no idea, no clear notion, that his voluntary actions *were going to yield a habit*. And then, third and finally, there is reason to doubt that the voluntary actions will yield a habit unbeknownst to those to perform those actions (or even when they think that what they are doing will cause a habit to form). So Aristotle's argument for the voluntariness and consequent blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, respectively, of habits of or tendencies toward injustice or toward justice just won't fly. Like Pico della Mirandola and so many others he is assuming something close to the thesis that we have to make our own character in order to be held responsible for having that character and for the choices that character leads (but doesn't force) us to make. But he has given us no good reason to think that we ever do substantially shape or make our own overall moral character in this way and thus is no reason to deny what our argument thus far has tended to show: that people aren’t ever morally responsible for what they do.

But before I tell you about Kant's arguments re the shaping of character, let me mention one qualification that is implicit in what I have been telling you in the past two chapters. Even if voluntary actions or frequently repeated behaviors do not lay down habits in the way Aristotle believed, I have never denied that people can change morally. But the kinds of cases in which, over time or perhaps at a single time, this can occur typically involve outside influences--either the deliberate intervention of

others onto our bad moral choices or habits or the accidental, i. e., unintended and unforeseen, noticing of facts about people to which one had previously not been sensitive: the kind of thing that happened with King David and the Prophet Nathan and with the factory owner we described in chapter 2. But in chapter 2 we saw another case that depended on outside influence *but also allowed for moral self-cultivation,* the case of the Caucasian-American citizen married to a Korean-American woman of the first generation. And I mention this last case now because, frankly, I am not sure what I have just been saying in response to Aristotle's views and arguments applies to this sort of case.

When the Caucasian-American man starts reading Korean history and literature (in translation) and eventually becomes, through his readings, more empathically or emotionally sensitive to his in-laws and other Koreans—and perhaps, as a spillover, to others as well—hasn't he shaped his own character in a quite deliberate way? And if he has, do I have any right to deny that he is morally responsible or deserving or praiseworthy for what he then *does* as a result of that change in/of moral character? If moral responsibility and desert are tied to the self-shaping of character, don't we have to say that when someone deliberately shapes his character for the better, he is morally responsible to some extent for the improvement in his character and, at least to some extent, for the actions that naturally arise or occur as a result of the change (I am not going to go into the details of how the Caucasian-American's actions change as a result of his readings). If so, then in these fairly rare and non-standard cases, we have some moral desert and responsibility. And I say "some" moral desert and speak of moral responsibility "to some extent" because if he weren't already a pretty good person as a result of influences that operated in a way that didn't constitute his *making himself* into a pretty good person, he wouldn't have been so bothered by his brother-in-law's reactions to his own actions and attitudes and wouldn't have resolved on a course of readings in order to become more sensitive to things Korean. That moral-developmental background has a definite role to play in his becoming the better person and

since he is not responsible for that background, his isn't fully responsible for the change in his character that (we can assume) occurs as a result of his readings.

But still, there is or may be some measure or moral responsibility and moral desert and praiseworthiness in such cases, and so the universe I am describing or attempting to describe, the universe containing human life and human lives as it is empirically plausible to view them, is not as free of desert, etc., as I may have led the reader to think I think. Nonetheless, the picture we have painted leaves very little room for moral desert and responsibility of the sort most people think is possible and of the sort that most philosophers have wished to defend. But now on to Kant.

2

Kant deals with the issue of self-shaping in ways that are, well, distinctively Kant-like. For example, he is very interested in strength of will as a path to the overcoming of temptations, and Aristotle emphasizes this aspect of the moral life much less than Kant does. Also there is no assumption in Aristotle that we have a duty to shape ourselves into better people, whereas for Kant this is one of our most important (imperfect) duties. Now I don't want to dwell on this last issue because it isn't essential to the present argument. The question we need to address is whether we are capable of shaping ourselves into better people, not whether we have a duty to do so—though if we find that we cannot shape ourselves morally in any overall substantial way, then on Kantian assumptions we don't have any duty to do so and Kant will have been mistaken to think we do.

But before we leave the subject of a duty to improve oneself morally, let me just make another sort of objection to this idea that is fairly unrelated to the question whether we can actually fulfill such a duty if it exists. The idea that we have a moral duty to improve ourselves strikes me as morally offensive

and to that extent, then, implausible because it involves a double counting of human sins or moral transgressions. Someone who acts wrongly and who never tried to improve herself will be doubly at moral fault every time she acts wrongly, and that seems to me to pile on morally in a most uncharitable manner. Isn't it sufficient to say that the person who acted wrongly acted wrongly, without having to add that it was wrong of them not to have made themselves into the kind of person who wouldn't do that sort of thing? But enough of that. Let's turn to the question whether moral self-improvement is possible along the lines Kant suggests. And I shall ignore what Kant has in common with Aristotle or the Confucians and focus on what he says about willpower, where he expresses himself in a distinctively Kantian way.

According to Kant, each time we exercise willpower to repress or inhibit impulses or desires that run contrary to our moral duty, we weaken the future force of those impulses/desires and make it easier for ourselves to resist them in the future.3 So someone who understands this and who seeks (to fulfill his duty) to improve himself morally can do so by resisting given temptations (Kant is thinking especially of appetitive temptations). But can someone deliberately and effectively go about shaping himself in this way?

It all depends on the empirical assumption that resisting temptation on a given occasion makes it easier to do so subsequently, an assumption that Kant may have believed plausible or even obvious, but that recent psychology casts a great deal of doubt on. Recent studies of willpower tend to show that it is vulnerable to all sorts of negative influences (fatigue and low blood sugar can decrease willpower) and that one's willpower can be depleted, at least in the short term, by one's having exercised it on a particular occasion. This last point works to some degree against Kant's assumptions about the consequences of exerting willpower, but of course it would be open to the Kantian to say in reply that even if exercising willpower depletes it in the short term, it strengthens it in the long term or at least

attenuates the desires against which the willpower has been exercised, in the longer run. But unfortunately there seems to be little or no empirical evidence even for this weaker assumption.

I was recently in email correspondence with Roy Baumeister, the co-author, with John Tierney of a book called *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, that deals in more specific psychological terms with the phenomenon of willpower than Kant, Aristotle, or any other philosopher ever has.4 And I asked him directly whether he thought willpower could be increased over time and the strength of tempting desires/impulses diminished over time by resisting temptations. His answer was that immediate temptations don't seem to lose their power as a result of earlier exercises of willpower, but that we can diminish our tendencies to give in to temptations by keeping them at a distance, i. e., finding ways to avoid "occasions of sin" where a given temptation can exert an immediate influence over us.

In addition to talking of the ways in which the exercise of willpower can diminish our reserves of willpower in the short term and of the physical effects of fatigue, anger, and what have you on the efficacy or strength of our willpower, the book *Willpower* spends a great deal of time talking about how one can avoid tempting situations—e. g., staying away from streets with candy or ice cream shops whose allure one's sweet tooth finds hard to resist. And the book is far from alone in making this kind of point. David Watson and Roland Tharp's *Self-Directed Behavior: Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment* goes in great (and admirable) detail into the ways, for example, in which someone fighting the temptations of drugs, alcohol, gambling, overeating, or betting can "externalize" their problem in order to deal with it.5 If I tell everyone I know that I intend to lose weight, I have a motive to stay away from tempting shops or aisles in the supermarket that is additional to the reasons I initially had to try to lose weight: namely, the desire not to lose face with my friends. That motive can help tip the scale toward resisting temptations, even immediate temptations, but that doesn't mean that the (felt)

strength of those immediate temptations has been in any way diminished by one's previous or recent good behavior. Rather, another factor or item has been put in the scales weighing against one's strong temptation toward overeating.

Similarly, someone who wants to stop taking a certain drug can sign up with a company dedicated to helping people overcome their drug habits in a way that also puts a strong factor or item in the scales against continued drug use. They can give the company a large sum of money and sign a contract with them that allows the company to confiscate that money if they test positive (or refuse to take a drug test) at the end of six or twelve months. And the psychology literature in this area is full of suggestions, excellent suggestions, about how a person who wishes to change bad habits can do so. But none of that literature subscribes to the thesis Kant assumed to be true, the thesis that we can weaken the future strength of temptations/impulses by refusing to act on them.

However, the Kantian might then reply "So what? If we can learn to indirectly avoid giving in to the impulses that lead us morally astray, isn't that good enough, and doesn't that count as a form of self-shaping for the morally better?" Well, not so fast. Let's carefully examine what these indirect techniques for dealing with tempting impulses actually imply for the possibility of moral self-cultivation or self-shaping. And it will help us to do this if we choose an illustrative (probably not entirely fictional) example of someone who wants and wants badly to change his habit, say, of gambling. Imagine that he has gambled in the past and, because he has lost money in doing so, has deprived his family of some of what they need for their comfort and safety. He has felt bad about this, but not bad enough to make him resolve to change his ways (he'd rather fight with his wife about the way he spends money than actually try to change the way he does). Let us imagine, however, that at a certain point he loses a great sum of money, enough to actually impoverish his family, and seeing in particular what this means for his children, he feels much guiltier than he has ever previously felt. Guilty enough, disgusted enough with

himself, that he now and finally resolves to take steps to prevent himself from gambling in the future. Announcements to his friends might not be very effective here, but imagine that he thinks of a way in which he can ensure that his paycheck goes entirely to his wife and that all the places where he has or could bet have been put on notice that he is not to be given any credit for gambling purposes. Even if all this might not, as a matter of fact, be enough to prevent him from gambling again, let's just assume, in order to illustrate the relevant philosophical point, that it is enough or that he takes other measures that can effectively prevent him from ever gambling (e. g., making it impossible for himself to ever again possess a credit card). The potential dire results of his gambling are now painfully clear to him in a way that was never true or obvious before, and the shock and pain (to him) turn out to be enough to make him do things that make it impossible for him ever to gamble.

So the first question to ask is: has this man improved morally? And the answer is, at least on the surface, far from obvious. Isn't the only difference between the present situation and what had been the case previously the fact that he hadn't earlier done anything so terrible to his family? And how can a difference in consequences make a difference to his moral character, given especially that he presumably all along had the capacity for guilt that he is displaying as a result of what he has now done to his family?

Well, we have to be careful. His general capacity to feel guilt may well have been something he was born with, but guilt or guilty feeling can accumulate over time, and when it does or has, a given person may be primed to feel guilty for later misdeeds in a way he or she wasn't primed previously. In our example, it was assumed that the man had felt bad earlier for the (say) inconveniences his gambling had caused his family. And arguably (and plausibly) the earlier guilt primed him to feel even more guilty when he subsequently impoverishes his family (the family home has to be forfeited) than he would have felt if he hadn't earlier done things that made him feel somewhat guilty. Guilt can accumulate over time

and as a result of a string of misdeeds, so we shouldn't assume, as we did above, that his capacity for guilt has always been the same. True, his basic capacity for guilt, his capacity, therefore, in one sense, hasn't changed; but if by capacity for guilt one means the man's actual(ized) *tendency* to feel guilt, then in that respect he has changed. The man will have a stronger tendency to feel guilt for gambling than he had originally and/or he will have a tendency to feel stronger guilt for a given act of gambling than he had before his gambling started having dire effects on his family. And all this is in fact relevant to the question whether he changes morally for the better.

To show you why, however, I need to bring in a simpler or more primitive case to illustrate the same basic point. The moral education of children is supposed to help them become morally better people, and (as I mentioned in chapter 2) one of the most noted techniques of moral education is the technique psychologist Martin Hoffman has called "inductive discipline" or just plain "induction." Induction involves a parent whose child has hurt or harmed another child immediately taking their child aside and getting them to focus the pain or harm they have caused. If this is done unthreateningly (firmly, but calmly) and the child has a good relationship with the parent, then the child's empathy will be aroused or elicited. (There is evidence that every normal child is born with empathic tendencies.) And the child will feel bad about what they have done, a kind of primitive guilt. Now I will be saying more about the moral and psychological status of this kind of bad feeling in our next chapter, where we are going to discuss the implications of denying moral desert and moral responsibility for the way we lead and think about our lives. But for the moment let's just focus on the bad feeling the child has as a result of empathically taking in what they have done to the child they have hurt.

Hoffman says that a single use of induction may not make a child resist all future (unprovoked) aggression against other children, but that if induction is used a few times, the child will eventually stop himself from aggressing against other children before the aggression can actually occur. Rather than just

feel bad after the fact for aggressing, the accumulation of such bad feeling over a number and variety of instances can inhibit aggression before it occurs. In other words, the repeated instances of induction cause a build-up or increase of motivational resistance to aggressive action, and the child who goes through this process therefore emerges as less aggressive than they were previously. To that extent the child is a morally better individual than they were beforehand—induction is, after all, a form of moral *education*. And we can apply what has just been said about the moral education of children (though, as chapter 2 indicated, induction isn't the only way they can be morally educated) to the case of the man whose gambling has impoverished his family.

The man's earlier guilt in relation to the less harmful effects of his gambling paves the way toward the strong reaction he has when his gambling finally impoverishes his family. In parallel with cases of inductive discipline, the earlier bad feeling or guilt may not cause him to change his ways, stop gambling, but there may be a build-up of guilt nonetheless as a result of the earlier malfeasances, an increased resistance in the man to acts of gambling that reaches its full fruition when he impoverishes his family. The earlier bouts of guilt may well have softened him up for the incredibly strong guilt reaction he has when his gambling finally has utterly dire consequences. In other words and to reemphasize something I said earlier, there may have been an accumulated sense of guilt, a build-up of guilt, that causes the guilt reaction he has when he impoverishes his family to be much stronger than it would have been if this had been the first and only time he had gambled to ill effect, and we are supposing that that greater strength is what leads him, finally, to institute the changes in how he lives his life that make it impossible for him to gamble again. As in the case of the child who learns to inhibit aggression through inductive discipline working on her or his natural empathic tendencies, the man who institutes such changes is plausibly regarded as a changed man, a better man than he was previously.

And doesn't he bring about this moral change himself—by bringing about the changes in himself and his environment that will prevent him from gambling again? If that is so, then we have an example of moral self-shaping, though its character will be quite different from what Kant imagined. The man won't have shaped himself into a person whose aberrant desires are less strong than they were: that would be moral self-improvement, but we have seen no reason to believe that he has improved himself in this way. Rather, and as we are now imagining things, he has, in reaction to the enormous guilt he felt (and continued to feel) when his gambling impoverished his family, shaped himself into a morally better person by deliberately making changes in the world and his power to affect the world that will prevent him from ever again gambling away his family's wealth and welfare. But is this the right way to view things? Does it make moral and conceptual sense? I think not.

Again, consider the case of induction. The child builds up more and more resistance to hurting or harming other children (or others more generally) till they reach the point where they no longer do aggressive things to other children. And when, we may ask, does the moral improvement occur? At the moment where, tempted as he might have been previously to hit another child, he inhibits that sort of action. Does that action *make* him into a better child or is it rather the *sign* of his moral improvement? Surely it must be the latter. The moral improvement occurs in stages as his resistance to hitting, say, builds up in response to repeated use by one parent or adult or another of inductive discipline that occurs on occasions when he actually has hurt someone and that focuses the child on the pain or harm he has (deliberately or thoughtlessly) caused to the some other child/person. The actual inhibitory act is just a sign, is it not?, is just a sign or evidence that the process of changing the child's motivation vis-à-vis others has been (relatively and in one respect) successful. You don't have to be a virtue ethicist to see that the moral change occurs before the child acts, that is, refrains from acting aggressively. (Kantians might well agree.)

But then when we transpose these ideas back to the case of the gambler, we see that it is far from clear that the man we are imagining improves himself, makes himself into a better person, by instituting changes in the world and in his own power to affect the world that make it impossible for him to gamble. The motivational change, in parallel with the case of a child subjected to inductive discipline, occurs before the man actually initiated the changes necessary to undercut his possibilities of gambling. Indeed, it is the motivational change in him that *causes* him to institute those changes. And it seems much more plausible to imagine that the motivational change constitutes, in his case, the moral change for the better that occurs in or for him, than to say, as we originally put it, that the moral change occurs through the actions that he initiates as a result of that motivational change.

Of course, the actions he initiates are under his control, and if the moral change occurs through those actions, it occurs as a result of his own choosing and counts as an instance of self-shaping. (Perhaps even deliberate self-shaping if the man thought that initiating the changes in himself and the world would cause him to be a better person.) But if the moral change occurs through the accumulation and strengthening of inhibitory guilt, then it is not something he deliberately caused, and he can't be said to have shaped himself morally into a better person. The guilt, rather, *shaped him*.

In that case we have still not found a plausible Kantian-type example of someone's deliberately or even non-deliberately shaping or making themselves into a morally better, much less a morally good, person. Now the case of the man married to a Korean-American woman that we discussed in the last chapter *was* an example of someone deliberately making himself into a better person (assuming that his readings in Korean history and literature had the effects he sought). But although our example of the gambling addict illustrates the possibility of personal moral growth in the absence of any parent-like teacher, it is growth in that case that isn't deliberately sought or undertaken, and the addict doesn't, as we have seen, *shape himself* into a better person. We still haven't found a way to block the conclusion

that people are generally not morally responsible for their actions (or attitudes) nor morally deserving of anything on the basis of their actions (or attitudes).

But before we move on from this conclusion, I want to dwell for a moment on what I think is an element of paradox in what I have just been saying about the case of the gambling addict. The addict becomes a better person as a result of his own malfeasances and the resultant accumulating guilt. It is because the guilt is or has become so harrowing for him that he resolves to make it impossible for himself to gamble away his family's money again. And let us assume too that the sheer strength of the guilt causes or allows that resolve to be effective. If he felt less guilt or less deeply guilty, he might backslide, might not carry out his initial resolve to make it impossible for him to gamble—after all he does still have the gambling impulse. But if the shock of the guilt is strong enough, it may, I think, carry through to a plan for change that the man effectively, and without backsliding, carries out. In that case, the man may express his own effective desire to make the requisite changes in his life and that of his family by saying, to himself or others, that he wants never again to do the harmful and wrongful things his gambling has led him to do to his family. But he might also say to himself or others that he wants to be a better man (to his family). And herein lies the paradox.

As we are imagining the case, he already *is* the better man that he says he wants to become. And his state of improved moral character is thus expressed, at least partly, in his desire to be a better person, a desire that involves him in actually misconceiving his own case. (Something similar can happen with a child who has changed as a result of inductive discipline.) As I say, there is something paradoxical about this, but to understand better what the paradox amounts to, I need to bring in a related moral paradox that has already been spoken of in the philosophy literature. Years ago, the scholar of Asian thought David Nivison described what he termed "the paradox of virtue," the fact, as he assumed, that in order to want to become a morally better or more virtuous person, one already has to be such a person.6 This

implies that one can't in fact want to be or become a better person than one is, and of course if that is the case, the whole idea of deliberately cultivating a higher level of one's own virtue, the idea of moral self-cultivation or deliberate moral self-shaping, is a non-starter.

Now the example of the man married to a Korean-American woman shows us that Nivison's worry is probably overstated. The man does seek and strive to be a better person and isn't yet the better person that he wants to be. But our case of the gambling addict shows that there is still an aspect of paradox to what Nivison was talking about. The gambling addict may express his resolve to institute effective changes in his life by saying that he wants to do just that, but it would also be quite natural for him to express that resolve and the guilt on which it is based by saying that he wants to be or become a better person. It is natural, in other words, for him to be under a bit of an illusion about what has happened and can happen in his life. He already is the better person he says and believes he wants to become, and so he either lacks the desire that he says he has or, for reasons he himself is unaware of, cannot fulfill that desire.6a

Now at this point the reader may wonder whether I am being sufficiently charitable to the gambling addict who says he want to change. Why not assume that he really does desire to change and that he can change morally by effecting the changes in his life that he wants to implement and succeeds in implementing? But think what this would mean. It would mean that he makes himself into a better person by irrevocably putting his wife in charge of his paycheck and by doing the other things that make it impossible for him ever again to impoverish his family. And does this make any sense? How can signing over his paycheck to his wife improve him morally? In what way does it lead to his *becoming* a better person? Isn't the act really better conceived as the result of moral change in him than as effecting such change? And if this means that someone who has changed will likely misconceive what has happened or is happening to them, it seems a morally costless kind of misconception? How does his

thinking he needs to change for the better when he already has make it more likely that he will act wrongly; how does such a misconception involve an invidious moral attitude or motive?

If anything, there is a kind of moral modesty in his thinking the way he does: he doesn't presume on the moral change that has already taken place in him. (Perhaps this modesty expresses or shows how guilty he feels.) And modesty in general is often conceived as involving an underestimation of one's own merits, a lack of presumptuousness, that we find morally attractive. This is precisely what the man in our example does or feels with respect to a particular kind of merit, moral merit, so I don't think there is any harm in conceiving his case (as I have conceived it) as one where accumulating guilt changes someone for the morally better, but where the person thus changed remains doubtful or more than doubtful about whether they have yet changed (enough).7

The cumulative result of the last two chapters is that moral responsibility and desert are for the most part (remember the Korean case) impossible for us humans because of the conditions under which we are or become morally better or worse. This is a very different sort of argument from the appeal to metaphysical considerations that is the typical basis for recent arguments for roughly the same skeptical or negative conclusion. And I see no reason why the proponent of the other arguments shouldn't accept what I have said here as an additional argument for denying moral desert and responsibility. In fact, Derk Pereboom offers an abbreviated version of the argument I have offered here as a kind of afterthought to the metaphysical considerations he thinks undercut human moral responsibility.8 And like many others who deny human moral responsibility, he goes on to consider whether that denial has the undesirable implications for human life that Strawson's views tell us it would. Strawson tells us that the denial of responsibility would affect our reactive attitudes in a way that would have intolerable implications for the way we live and think about our lives. And Pereboom and others have argued that we can live with those implications. But in our next chapter I shall argue that these strong skeptics about

human free will and moral responsibility have overestimated the untoward results of accepting such a view of things. I shall argue that those results are in no way unfortunate, not in the least regrettable. And if we can make out the case for that conclusion, we will have all the more (practical? theoretical?) reason to accept the idea that human beings are never morally responsible or morally deserving.

Footnotes

1. I have been speaking about the human case, but constructing any conceivable example of overall moral self-shaping is a difficult thing to do. I want to remain neutral on the question whether moral self-shaping is possible in principle, and in the present book, therefore, am giving empirical/psychological arguments for my skeptical conclusion(s). Still, what we learn from thinking about actual psychological mechanisms and their efficacy in certain directions might eventually lead us to conclude that moral self-shaping *is* impossible in principle.

2. However, Aristotle says some things that go against this common interpretation of his views: see, for example, the *Categories* 13a 22-31. I am indebted, for this reference, to Kritjan Kristjansson.

3. See especially Georg Ludwig Collins, ed., *Moral Philosophy from the Lectures of Professor Kant, Winter Semester 1784-85* in volume 27 of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*. For helpful discussion of these lectures, see Paul Guyer, *Kant's System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005, pp. 136ff. Kant's commitment to our human ability to shape our own character is also made abundantly clear in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where Kant speaks of "man's character, which he himself creates." (See the L. W. Beck translation, NY: Macmillan, 1985, p. 191.)

4. Roy Baumeister and John Tierney*, Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, NY: Penguin Press, 2011.

5. David Watson and Roland Tharp, *Self-Directed Behavior: Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment*, 9th edition, Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007.

6. See Nivison's "The Paradox of Virtue" in Bryan van Norden, ed., *The Ways of Confucianism*, La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1996.

6a. Someone who feels guilty for what he has done to his family, who intends to put in place barriers to his ever doing such a thing again, but who doesn't follow through on those intentions can be said to have changed less, in moral terms, than the man I am describing in the text. I am indebted here to discussion with Haley Mathis.

7. Here I follow Julia Driver's account of the virtue of modesty in numerous of her writings. That view has been attacked from a number of directions, but I have never seen a really effective argument against her idea that modesty is or involves a virtue of ignorance. Notice, by the way, that if my accounts of the gambler case and of the case of the man married to a Korean-American woman are correct, then they differ importantly as to when moral change occurs. On the view I have just defended, the gambler's increasing guilt constitutes gradual moral improvement that comes to a head (becomes overwhelming guilt) when his gambling finally causes his family to be impoverished. What he does thereafter to make gambling impossible for himself doesn't cause any further moral improvement. But in the Korean case, the man's guilt at what he sees is his brother-in-law's reaction to himself constitutes just the first moral improvement he undergoes (an improvement that won't count as an instance of moral self-cultivation). What he then does by way of reading Korea-related books presumably will help morally sensitize and change him further (and this process will arguably count as an instance of moral self-cultivation).

Incidentally, what I said in the main text about the man's guilt leading him to underestimate or altogether ignore the moral improvement that has already occurred him seems to be the other side of the coin of what I have elsewhere described (see my "Driver's Virtues," *Utilitas* 16, 2004) as our tendency in cases of difficult moral choice to feel guilty for whatever choice we have made and to assume we have acted wrongly in making that choice. Bernard Williams and others have held that the guilt a decent person would inevitably feel, no matter what they did, in a situation like Sophie's Choice (see the eponymous book by William Styron) is evidence for the existence or possibility of moral

dilemmas, situations where through no fault of one's own one cannot escape acting wrongly. But another interpretation of Sophie's Choice type cases is that they aren't dilemmas, but that our sheer (irrational?) guilt makes us think they are, makes us think we have acted wrongly. And such an interpretation will then add that decent people can't avoid being irrational in this way. My *Utilitas* article sought to interpret Sophie's Choice type situations as situations in which a decent person of necessity feels so guilty that they *overestimate* their *moral failing*(s), and that would, as I say, be the opposite side of the guilt coin from the gambling addict I have described and who arguably, as a result of intense (and perhaps to some degree also irrational) guilt, *underestimates* his own *moral improvement*.

8. See his op. cit., pp. 196f. His stated conclusion is also narrower than what I have argued for. He says that in a universe where one doesn't make one's moral character, one can't deserve respect for one's character, but I suspect he would agree with me that in such a universe one actually doesn't morally deserve *anything*.