

WHAT FRIENDSHIP TELLS US ABOUT MORALITY: A CONFUCIAN ETHICS
OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Drawing on classical Confucian thought, this work investigates how the features of friendship, broadly construed, give rise to a conception of ethical living. I first argue that the demands of modern moral theories, such as consequentialism, and of friendship are incongruent and that, since friendship is necessary for a worthwhile life, there is reason to develop a conception of ethical conduct starting from the features of friendship. I show how the basic features of ethical life, such as justification, obligation, practical reasons and norms delimiting acceptable and unacceptable action, can be derived from the practices of personal relationships.

To do this, I consider an ethical tradition that has placed personal relationships at the heart of its normative thought. I argue that the classical Confucian tradition yields novel conceptions of justification, obligation and so forth; further, these are integral to the conducting of personal relationships.

Based on the premise that any conception of ethical conduct takes some account of human practical activity to be fundamental and builds an ethics from this, I defend the view offered by developing a conception of practical activity in which personal relationships are fundamental. Here, the most important kind of action arises within a rolling series of episodic interactions with people who are or can be familiar to some degree. Such interactions are, on account of the familiar and personal particulars integral to them, personal. They are acts of friendship because they aim at making these interactions go as well as possible, by creating shared affective experiences or moving and memorable events. I call such friendship *event friendship*.

Finally, I address the objection that such an ethics applies only to a limited private realm and fails to guide conduct in the public realm. I argue that the basic practices and features outlined can coordinate conduct widely, across interpersonal social networks, and so create a stable social life. The relation between an ethics of personal relationships and moral theorising in the public realm is symbiotic; each is needed as a corrective for the other.

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Preface: An ethics of personal relationships with Confucian characteristics?

This project investigates the ethical status of personal relationships, by drawing on Confucian social and ethical thought. Some of its central themes are neatly expressed in the following extract. Describing his research in the Chinese coastal province of Shandong in 1988-90, anthropologist Andrew Kipnis describes the extreme confusion caused by the simple act of trying to confirm a villager's name:

During my first summer in Fengjia [the village where the author's fieldwork was undertaken] I spent a fair amount of time updating our version of the village's household registration booklet. Compiled in the early 1980s, the booklet listed the head and members of each household in the village. Old women were often listed by their natal surnames and the character *shi*, a word that might be translated by the French usage *nee*. When looking for such an elderly woman, I would first go to the house where I thought she lived. I would ask (for example) if Zhang *Shi* or 'Mrs Zhang' (Zhang *Taitai*) lived there. Usually, even when I posed it to the old woman for whom I was looking, the question led to utter confusion. I found that my best strategy was to first find some younger relatives of the woman and then ask if their eighty-year-old grandmother was around. After finding her, it was still difficult to confirm her name. When asked who she was, the woman might point and say 'I'm his mother', or 'She calls me "grandmother"'. At best, after going over the household registration booklet with me, a younger, literate relative might tell me 'Yes, that must be her'. As these people were generally being very helpful, I did not consider these instances purposeful obstinateness toward a rude foreigner. Rather, I believe these women had either forgotten their names or could not comprehend anyone attempting to address them by one (Kipnis, 1997, p. 35).

Kipnis' account is not exceptional. The difficulty of figuring out whether someone has a name and what it might be also appears in Chinese literary texts.¹ The trend Kipnis describes might surprise those who assume the existence of an individuated and unitary subject, encapsulated by a personal name, which exists prior to social engagement and roles. Someone, it is thought, who can unfailingly be picked out against a background of other people and things that are clearly not them. Upon this autonomous subject a conception of ethical conduct can be constructed; often it is one that stresses rational voluntary consent, the decisions of individuals, freedom to pursue personal projects, and a developed sense of personal responsibility and culpability.

The self-understanding displayed by the elderly women of Fengjia, however, contrasts sharply with this ideal individual, and conveys the importance of personal

¹ See, for example, the writer Shen Rong's short story 'The Secret of Crown Prince Village', set in rural China in the 1970s (Shen 1987).

relationships to some when thinking about themselves and how to act. The following work attempts to develop the insight expressed in the extract, exploring its implications for the fundamental ethical question: how should one live? It develops a picture of an ethical subject whose decisions about action are shaped and directed at a fundamental level by engagement in personal relationships. On this account, the most salient action-guiding concepts for this subject pertain to relationships. I call this subject a *phialial subject* to indicate this close link between action and the many action-influencing and co-ordinating practices that constitute relationships.

The origins of such a project reside in three related concerns: an intuitive tension or even conflict between personal relationships and what is sometimes considered ethical conduct; the suspicion that modern moral theory is too limited in content and scope; and the need to explain the Confucian texts' fascination with personal relationships as the basis for ethical life.

The tension between ethical conduct and personal relationships might be stated as follows. Acting for our 'nearest and dearest' is often ascribed a moral force. Similarly, while failing to help strangers can be frowned upon, virulent condemnation is directed at those who neglect, for example, family relations. At the same time, however, what is done in acting for such close others is sometimes viewed, even by the agent, as morally troubling or even wrong. Self-deception and lying, for example, are sometimes needed to sustain a relationship. What is needed to cultivate and sustain a relationship can sometimes lead us towards unethical action.

We might summarise this tension as an triumvirate of incompatible claims: close personal relationships are central to ethical life, on account of their contribution to well-being and personal identity; maintaining close personal relationships requires that one be willing to act unethically; someone willing to act unethically when needed cannot live an ethical life. I want to explore this tension, taking friendship broadly construed as a case study, and considering its relation to conceptions of ethical conduct.

Exploring this tension between personal relationships and ethical conduct requires an answer to the question of what is 'ethical conduct'. Taken as a philosophical discipline, I understand 'ethics' as inquiry into what ideas or concepts should determine action. Without presuming to offer a final definition of ethics, the dissertation recognises quite

general and yet distinct ways of conceptualising ‘ethical conduct’ or ‘ethical life’ (I treat these terms as equivalents). Among these, I use one particular approach as a stalking horse to illuminate the position to be developed. Popular in recent Anglophone ethics, this is the appeal to moral theory: the stipulation of a single abstract standard of right action. Ethical justification, obligation and other everyday features of moral life are then ordered around such a foundation. At the root of this conception of ethical conduct is an intellectual judgment, which applies a stipulated standard of right action to situations, thereby arriving at a conclusive judgment as to whether a suggested action is permissible, prohibited, required or superogatory. Within this approach to ethics, much has been written about which exact form of moral theory is correct – act consequentialism, rule consequentialism, some or other species of deontology and so on. I am not concerned here with disputes and comparisons between competing theories, however, but with such theory as a particular approach to ethics.

Suspicion about the worth of such narrow moral theory is the second impetus for what follows. In particular, such moral theorising draws on an implicit but questionable claim: that we in fact know what moral considerations and moral deliberation are. There are, I believe, grounds for doubting whether moral theory accurately characterises the ethical life and the experiences of acting ethically. As Bernard Williams notes, (1993, xiii) we might criticise, ‘the assumption often made...that we are clear enough about what counts as moral considerations and sentiments, and that what moral philosophy must seek is the basis and status of those considerations, taken more or less as a whole’. This project seeks to question attempts within moral philosophy to reduce ethics to a single set of determinate and foundational considerations, such as maximisation of the good or identification of universally acceptable reasons for action. It is guided by the thought that novel descriptions of how actions are produced and directed lead to new insight into what counts as ethical conduct.

Rather than accept the numerous assumptions that underpin such narrowly-constructed moral theory, the dissertation seeks to explore other ways of conceptualising ethical activity. In this, it follows philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and Bernard Williams in taking a sceptical approach to such moral theory, which I call ‘narrow moral theory’ to distinguish it from the more general activity of

ethical theorising, of which this work is an example. It does not assume that there is a precise single account of right action that can adjudicate in practical conflicts, and accepts that the discipline might offer only sketches, heuristics and insights into human activities that are mutually incongruent and defy any neat conceptual unification. Nevertheless, each can be complex and inclusive enough to be a plausible conception of ethical life, and also concrete and compelling enough to be practically useful. As Iris Murdoch succinctly puts it, ‘Moral philosophy ought to be defended and kept in existence as a pure activity, or fertile area, analogous in importance to unapplied mathematics or pure “useless” historical research... There can be no substitute for pure, disciplined, professional speculation’ (1971, p. 76). A legitimate but modest aim of such ethical theorising is thus to prompt people to view their actions through different frameworks, thereby prompting subtle but important changes in their motivations and actions.

Aside from moral theory, ethical conduct has been conceived and distinguished in other ways. Some (e.g., Williams 1985) have approached ethical conduct starting from an account of dispositions. Here, it is not deliberative or intellectual certainty that distinguish ethical life but conviction and confidence in emotional and evaluative responses. Direct assessment of such responses by relating them to an explicit moral standard or test for rightness is not possible. Single acts of normative judgment cannot themselves be justified with finality. People’s conduct can, however, be refined and developed over time, through practice and training, reflective thought and argument. On this view, the source of ethical life and conduct lies in the social institutions and the public discourse that engender confidence in personal stances on normative issues and difficult practical choices. Ethical responses are, in part, a passive experiencing of conviction born of stable and gradually refined habits and dispositions, rather than being an outcome of an episode of deliberation. Rational argument is also important but, unlike the moral theory approach, it alone cannot conclusively resolve ethical disputes.

Another conception of ethical living starts from the ideal of more accurately perceiving or seeing reality. By being more attentive to the situation confronting them, and overcoming the distorting effects of the self or ego, people become good. Ethical living consists in techniques that bring under control an unruly self whose desires, drives and images are projected onto the world and prevent a more veridical seeing of people

and situations. Such means of control could include prayer and meditative contemplation, the mindless enjoyment of nature, and the sensitivity of the artist to the surrounding world, manifested as literature, visual and other arts. On this view, *pace* those who see intellectual judgement as the grounds of ethical conduct, the will and wilful deliberate choosing are not the defining characteristic of the moral person. The will cannot be so cleanly distinguished from desires, drives and urges that are not entirely transparent to the individual agent; rather, the will projects ideals onto the world rather than tracking and responding to an external reality. Reflectively working one's way towards a decision is thus less important than a veridical seeing of the situation confronting the agent. Appreciation of the right thing to do follows from such seeing; the agent often does not think about the self or how to decide, but humbly and without ego attends to reality. As Iris Murdoch puts it, 'Selfish concerns vanish; nothing exists except the things that are seen' (1971, p65). On this account, influential in the development of care ethics, paradigmatically moral people include the selfless mother of a large family or the person of great humility.

The aim of the dissertation is to augment the three approaches to ethical conduct just described by considering a fourth approach. This considers how engagement in personal relationships, and especially friendship, can constitute a form of ethical conduct. There are two reasons for approaching ethical conduct by starting from the practices and features of personal relationships. First, it reduces the tension noted above between personal relationships and what is considered ethical conduct, by claiming more of what is done for the sake of personal attachments as ethical conduct. It does this by partially re-conceiving what ethical conduct consists in. As a result, when the demands of narrow moral theory and personal relationships conflict then moral theory's authority is correspondingly reduced.

The second reason or motive arises from the recognition that at least one philosophical and ethical tradition – the Confucian tradition, represented by classical Chinese thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius – took personal relationships to be the most fundamental framework for guiding conduct. The tradition's striking concern with their cultivation and preservation calls for explanation. Doing so will help us make sense of Kipnis' description above of the women of Fengjia, and to appreciate the privileged

place that personal relationships have occupied in that tradition on questions of the self and how to live. The third and final aim of this work is thus to better understand exactly how the Confucian tradition constructs the realm of the ethical, and to transfer insights gained therein to contemporary debates about ethics in non-Confucian traditions.

The early Confucians approached ethical conduct through a range of concepts and ideas that appear alien or archaic to us now. These include a concern with ritual, harmony, filial piety, reverence and deference. Further, their texts contain little comment on matters of general principles to guide action or on a developed account of practical reasoning or practical wisdom. Instead, their advice about how to live is expressed through a range of concepts and practical suggestions that cluster around the conducting of personal relationships.

The Confucian vision presented will be just that – an incomplete intimation of how to act well. We must, from a contemporary vantage point, assess it without necessarily being compelled to adopt it as our own. At the same time, however, it is a vision that has something to recommend it to us. It is one further way to think about ethical conduct, a viewpoint that we might sometimes adopt without ruling out the adoption of more familiar moral viewpoints.

Dissertation Chapter Outline

Chapter I of the dissertation begins from an oft-experienced conflict of ethical convictions: that helping a friend is right, but the action one takes in doing so is wrong. Something like this tension is expressed in current arguments about the relation of friendship to moral theory (understood as an objective test for right action). Acting as a good friend might fail to produce the greatest utility, for example. Some (e.g., Badhwar, 1991) argue that friendship is necessary for well-being and intrinsically valuable; and that moral theory is incompatible with friendship and must thus be rejected. I argue that these arguments fail. They do not show that friendship is incompatible with moral theory, since they rely on question-begging definitions of friendship. I argue that friendship consists of features that share a family-resemblance, and that no single feature is necessary such that it leads to a conflict with moral theory.

A preliminary comment is needed on the use of the term ‘friendship’, and the relation of friendship, personal relationships and family relationships. In this work, I often use ‘friendship’ and ‘personal relationship’ interchangeably. These terms are not strictly equivalent, however. For example, there can be family relations that are not friendship and friendship relationships independent of family, with both being instances of personal relationships. The reason for keeping the two terms together is that both capture something of importance in the position to be articulated, with neither quite capturing the full range of features discussed. The term friendship captures some of the features and practices that inform the conception of ethical conduct developed here, yet these do not readily map onto a single relationship term such as friendship. They are shared across a variety of personal relationships, including family, modern accounts of friendship and other relationships such as student-teacher and even colleagues or acquaintances on close but not intimate terms. ‘Personal relationship’ is helpful here as a term sufficiently capacious to accommodate these diverse features. At the same time, however, ‘friendship’ is a useful description of what emerges as the most ethical kind of personal relationship, since this might be described as a species of friendship. It is not, however, the intimate and exclusive friendship familiar in contemporary liberal society, which is founded on a deep familiarity with character, equality, and voluntary consent. It is one characterized by an orientation towards shared affective or aesthetic experiences, and openness to suggestion and redirection by others. As long as the reader keeps in mind that what matter are the practices and features of relationships that influence and direct conduct, and not the word used to indicate these, then it is a minor issue as to which generic noun is used.

The second chapter explores more carefully why the pro-friendship-and-anti-moral-theory arguments failed. Moral theory (understood as a general test for whether an action is morally justified or not) claims a neat fit between what its standards of justification require and how personal relationships are typically conducted. However, the vagueness and variability of friendship, which allowed moral theorists to deflect the claims of conflict presented in chapter I, means that friendship is *incongruent* with moral theory. To show this, I develop two contrasting accounts of an ethical subject or person, one whose conduct is governed by moral theory (the *moral subject*) and one by personal

relationships (the *phialial subject*). I argue that it is difficult for someone with an existing commitment to personal attachments to both accord with the standards of justification integral to moral theory and to do justice to his or her personal relationships. Not only is it difficult to articulate the details of relationships in a way that makes them amenable to the judgement required by moral theory, but the practice of making such moral judgements itself can endanger these relationships. Such judgments are thus *risky* from the viewpoint of the phialial subject.

I then argue that not only is the kind of ethical justification demanded by moral theory is more problematic than proponents of moral theory usually recognise, but also the practices of personal relationships themselves constitute a form of justification. This justificatory force comes from two sources: the extent to which human conduct is typically embedded in or inseparable from personal relationships; and the capacity of personal relationships to direct and redirect a person's conduct (thereby avoiding conflict). If this account of justification is plausible, then someone can be committed to personal relationships and act with justification. This is the first clue that personal relationships can inform a conception of ethical living independently of moral theory.

Developing such an alternative ethical vision requires two things. First, any conception of ethical living must give substance to certain generic features of human experience and action. These include a concern with justification, a sense of obligation, adherence to norms and standards that delimit right and wrong, an account of practical reasoning and its scope, and motivation. Explaining how personal relationships give distinctive content to these generic categories is thus necessary. Building on the account of ethical justification derived from personal relationships in chapter II, chapter III continues this task. It does so, however, by examining the early Confucian tradition, and the *Analects* in particular. This, I suggest, substantiates these basic categories by drawing on the features and practices of personal relationships, thus offering a conception of ethical living whose content is informed by personal relationships. Consider, for example, a sense of obligation as this is experienced in practical choice. It is no longer structured around a general impersonal obligation (to accord with 'moral' standard X), but is experienced within personal interaction. It appears as an obligation to create a basis for

familiarity with each person encountered in the local social world, which I call *serial personal obligation*.

In exploring how personal relationships constitute an ethical vision in the *Analects*, I also respond to various objections that the account is either textually inaccurate (unfaithful to the *Analects*) or conceptual and philosophically flawed (presenting accounts of action that are not ethical).

The first task is thus to substantiate generic ethical categories by examining the features of personal relationships. The second task begins from the thought that any conception of ethical conduct typically begins by taking some conception of human practical life as primary or ideal and then builds an account of ethical conduct around that. This need not be a simple feature or idea, but can include complex ideas like individual or collective human flourishing or action that expresses a capacity for rational self-determination. Regardless, it is this guiding framework or ‘deeper’ idea about practical life that determines the shape of the ethical vision presented; different conceptions of ethical conduct take different aspects of human practical life as the most important for determining action. Each foregrounds certain forms of practical action while relegating others to a secondary concern. A convenient illustration is the ‘Kantian’ concern with rational duty as an expression of freedom, and the unimportance of invasive and capricious emotions and inclinations. This is closely linked to a picture of ideal action that understands human actions in terms of their possible relation to an imagined community of persons, each of whom is considered equal. The task for an ethics of personal relationships is to articulate a comparable basic framework of human action, in which the features and experiences of personal relationships occupy a foundational place.

Chapter IV addresses this demand. It also addresses the objection, noted above, that questions whether any action directed primarily by personal relationships can be truly ethical. Close personal relationships are fundamental to ethical living; yet personal relationships have a darker side; they appear to require conduct that is unethical, such as lying or deceiving. Further, acting ethically is sometimes taken to require considering the interests of all, or at least a wide range of people; but maintaining close personal relationships requires attention be largely limited to intimates. This suggests that personal

relationships are not a simple ethical good, whose features constitute an ethical vision, but are morally ambiguous.

The argument of chapter IV addresses this objection. I attempt to present a fundamental or ideal kind of practical activity, but one that also resolves this tension between the ethical and personal relationships. It takes the creation of a certain desirable quality of interaction as its goal. I take this to be the characteristic of a species of friendship that I call *event friendship*. It can be characterized as a form of shared activity that aims to create affecting or memorable experiences. Something like this kind of relationship is idealized in the Confucian conception of harmony and metaphors of music-making. This kind of personal relationship has some ‘ethical’ advantages over other forms of relationships, most notably close personal relationships. Such event friendship is not reliant on liking, admiration for character or shared history, or a deep partial commitment to a particular person, and is therefore a relationship a person can have with a much wider range of people, not merely familiar and close others. Such a relationship is both personal (it involves responding to the particular features of others within a vaguely defined context or situation) and ethical (such interaction is possible with any person, not merely ‘nearest and dearest’); this diffuses the tension between close personal relationships and the ethical demand for extended consideration of others.

Another objection against developing an account of the ethical from the features and practices of personal relationships must be considered, however. Arguably, personal relationships are a matter for the private realm and cannot be the basis for a wider social order. But, the objection runs, any ethical theory must deliver prescriptions for the public realm. The final chapter develops a response to this. I argue that personal bonds can lead to coordination of conduct on a sufficiently large scale and between sufficient numbers of people to produce one kind of social order. Such coordination is possible because, as noted earlier, personal relationships are constituted by practices that direct and redirect people’s conduct. The social order this produces might be described as an absence of practical conflict or harmony. Such a social phenomenon is already documented within societies influenced by the Confucian tradition. *Guanxi*, or the cultivation and maintenance of a network of personal attachments, constitute a form of common sense

ethics within these societies, a deeply rooted ‘form of life’. I explore this phenomenon and its potential to coordinate conduct beyond the home and a limited private realm.

It might be objected that such networks of personal attachments lead to cronyism and social injustice, and that impersonal institutions and laws are needed to ensure justice. In reply, I distinguish between different kinds of *guanxi*. While some are unethical (those which treat others as means in the pursuit of pre-existing interests), some forms of *guanxi* are ‘ethical’, creating or redirecting a person’s interest rather than merely helping to satisfy it; this feature is integral to ameliorating practical conflict. Further, I argue that networks of personal relationships have another kind of ethical relevance. The public realm has its own ethically troubling features and in creating social order from the ‘bottom-up’ or local, networks of personal relationships function as a site of resistance to impersonal public norms that are insufficiently sensitive to local conditions and personal difference. Thus personal relationships and impersonal moral laws exist in a symbiotic relationship, each regulating the excesses of the other. They have equal moral status, belonging to different but compatible conceptions of ethical conduct.

This work raises more questions than it is able to answer. However, I hope it serves as a fecund contribution to ethical theorising and to interpretive studies of Confucian philosophical thought. Most of all, it aims to save the core of classical Confucian thought from either appearing unethical - a conservative and rigid social order symbolised by archaic rituals – or from being read merely as an exotic illustration of familiar ethical theories. This happens, for example, when the *Analects* is assimilated into Aristotle’s virtue ethics, offering only slightly different virtues and with slightly less practical wisdom. In respecting the traditional Confucian concern with *ren* (仁, humaneness or authoritative conduct) and *li* (禮, ritualised conduct), but reading these as components in a broader ethics of personal relationships, I seek a contemporary extrapolation of classical Confucian social ethics; one that does not simply oppose contemporary values such as rational self-determination, but enters a creative dialogue with them.

Chapter I. Locating personal relationships: the conflict between friendship and moral theory

Much contemporary writing on ethics...depicts a focus on justice not only as distinct from but often as incompatible with serious concern for human virtue and excellence... Staunch *friends* of the virtues claim that reliance on abstract principles of justice is inimical to virtue and so to good lives and good communities...Justice and virtue...are depicted not as allies but as antagonists
- (Onora O'Neill, 1996, p. 9, italics added).

1. Introduction

I want to examine the relationship between the conducting of personal relationships and acting ethically. Contemporary uncertainty about this relationship exists, and can be expressed as follows. Personal relationships are thought to be necessary for personal well-being, and to act in ways necessary for well-being is to act ethically. However, another line of thought holds that acting ethically consists in acting rightly, in a principled and justified way; this can involve acting against personal relationships, which have no intrinsic moral worth. To explore this tension, in this chapter I focus on a particular kind of relationship, friendship, and its relation to ethical conduct.

Treating friendship as a kind of 'case study' is helpful because it is much discussed in the history of Western philosophy and thus offers an excellent introduction to thinking about personal relationships and the ethical. In addition, many of its ethically relevant features are, as we shall see, shared with other putatively different kinds of personal relationships, eroding but not eliminating the distinction between them. Furthermore, to anticipate later chapters, my underlying aim is to construct a conception of ethical conduct from many of the features and practices that constitute friendship, *broadly construed*. Whether such conduct is called friendship or not is secondary.

The chapter divides roughly into two halves. The first is a historical survey of the place of friendship within the ethical life. Focusing mainly on Aristotle and Kant, I show that friendship has been conceived differently at different times, and so has the ethical status of friendship – its place within a picture of an ethical life. This survey suggests that the normative evaluations of friendship often depend on prior normative assumptions about ethical conduct. This, in turn, raises the prospect of developing a conception of ethical conduct by starting from the practices and features of friendship.

In the second half, I consider one recent attempt to move in this direction, which involves appeal to friendship to attack a current orthodoxy in ethical theory: modern moral theories such as Kantian theory and consequentialism. Some claim an incompatibility between being a genuine friend and being the kind of ethical subject depicted in these theories. I will argue that their claims of incompatibility fail, however.

2. The historical relationship between friendship and ethics

Even a brief historical survey of the relationship between friendship and ethical conduct makes clear the diverse ways in which that relationship has been understood. In ancient Greece, for example, friendship – in the form of civic friendship – was once considered to be a political virtue; it, rather than the more familiar model of contract between self-interested strangers, was the foundation of a political community.² Such friendship was public, experienced towards a wide range of people, and tinged with obligation, in contrast to contemporary values of friendship such as voluntariness and privacy. Later, when moral conduct derived from a personal relationship with an omnipotent Christian god, friendship with fellow humans was sometimes viewed as a moral danger. Devotion to God was threatened by an indulgent distraction located in the earth-bound and imperfect human realm.³ In the early modern period, friendship was represented as a pure form of association between equals, unsullied by instrumental need and expedient attitudes towards friends. As the rise of commercial society and the free market created a separate realm in which self-interested actors could meet basic human needs, friendship became an ideal of freely-chosen voluntary association, where one's virtues could be manifested.⁴ A survey might also consider how the social norms that constitute friendship have changed. To give just one example: in the mid-seventeenth century adult male friends shared a bed (hence, the term 'bedfellows'), without this

² Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains this account; I discuss it in more detail below. For a contemporary discussion of civic friendship see Sibyl Schwarzenbach (1996).

³ As Lorraine Pangle Smith writes: 'Christianity's call to devote one's heart as completely as possible to God, and to regard all men as brothers, made the existence of private, exclusive and passionate attachments to individual human beings seem inherently questionable' (2003, p.2). This was not the only way Christian theologians understood friendship. In *Summa Theologiae*, for example, Aquinas saw friendship with God and the resulting charity for all humankind as a moral ideal (II.II. q. 26, 1981).

⁴ Adam Smith discusses this conception of friendship; I return to his account below, in the last section. For contemporary discussions of this conception of friendship, see Alan Silver (1997, pp. 43-74).

implying any particular sexual connotations or any particular tension with conventional social norms.⁵

This sketch suggests that the putative relationship between friendship and ethical conduct has not been fixed historically, but has changed as conceptions of friendship or ethical conduct changed.⁶ Understanding friendship as an ethical phenomenon thus requires an awareness of how it has been conceived historically, in different cultures and philosophical traditions.⁷

To better understand this changing relation, I will focus on two influential ethical theorists who held sharply contrasting views of friendship and its place in an ethical life: Aristotle and Kant. They are often read as presenting two distinct moral visions, one founded on principle and precise stipulation of right action, the other on virtue and human flourishing.⁸ To see how friendship fits into these two ethical visions and how understanding of it evolves, I will examine how Aristotle and Kant conceive of the relationship between friendship and justice. This will make clear the significant shift in friendship's role in ethical conduct. Let us begin with Aristotle.

2.1 Aristotle on friendship and justice

In Book VIII.1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes an intriguing comment about the relationship between friendship and justice:

Friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than justice... Further, if people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that is most justice seems to belong to friendship (1155a, 1985).

This passage appears to suggest that friendship is more fundamental to ethical life than justice: while friendship is necessary for acting justly, justice is not necessary for friendship. Friendship is thus presented as a value that has wider social application than

⁵ Alan Bray (2006) provides a detailed study of how the norms of acceptable friendship have evolved, and particularly how they changed in the second half of the seventeenth century.

⁶ For some extended discussions of friendship in various particular historical eras, see Lorraine Pangle Smith (2003), Alan Silver (1990) and Mark Vernon (2005). Michael Pakaluk's (1991) anthology contains a selection of philosophical discussions of friendship from different eras.

⁷ I return to the difficulty of defining friendship and thus its relation to ethical thought in section 6 below.

⁸ This distinction is important because it underlies a contemporary dispute between two rival camps. See for example, O'Neil's broadly Kantian defence of principles of justice in ethics against John McDowell's broadly Aristotelian account of virtue and moral particularism (O'Neil, 1996; McDowell, 1979). See also Jay Garfield (2000) for an attack on O'Neil's defence of principles.

justice, understood as a concern with due measure and common good. Let us deal with the two parts of this claim individually.

Aristotle mentions at least two ways in which friendship is necessary for acting justly. Firstly, in the interpersonal or informal realm, Aristotle portrays justice as the virtue of giving to others what is due to them.⁹ Importantly, this requires a desire to treat others justly.¹⁰ This in turn means a willingness to consider their interests and give weight to these; in short, *good will* is necessary. Otherwise a person would be unmotivated to make the appropriate judgement. But this attitude of good will is, for Aristotle, what friendship consists in - wishing another well to another for his or her own sake.¹¹ Justice partly depends on a personal attitude.

The claim that friendship is needed for justice also recognises that friendship ensures justice in the public realm: it is a social glue that 'holds cities together'.¹² For example, in discussing people's attitudes towards what is owed to them in formal relations of trade and exchange, a friendly attitude towards debts and obligations are necessary to keep these relations flexible and on good terms.¹³

Further, Aristotle also understands justice in terms of the reasonable application of law (Book V.7) and a friendly attitude is also necessary here. As Aristotle points out, laws cannot adequately address the great variety of social situations and practical problems that arise in society, and to ensure justice in such difficult cases requires something that Aristotle calls 'decency' (V.10): an individual must be sensitive to particularistic but relevant considerations that apply in such cases. Importantly, this sensitivity to particulars, allowing them to determine a practical response, is integral to the practices of friendship. Clearly, a sensitivity to particulars in legal cases can be understood independently of an account of friendship; what Aristotle appears to be emphasising is how cultivating an appreciation of another's particular features within

⁹ This type of justice is most readily identified by its opposite vice – that of overreaching or unfairness (V.1 1129a30) – and by the desire to distribute honours and wealth fairly (1130b30). Aristotle's account of justice is complex and contested. I will not attempt to delimit all senses of justice contained in Book V, only those most clearly relevant to friendship.

¹⁰ Aristotle writes that doing just acts requires one to 'wish what is just' (1129a10).

¹¹ In Book VIII, Aristotle defines friendship as 'wishing well to the other for his own sake' (1155b30). In Aristotle's account, such 'well-wishing' need not refer to a particularly close or intimate relationship; it is found in a variety of relationships, including those founded on utility and mutual benefit.

¹² See Schwarzenbach (1996) for a detailed exploration of this aspect of Aristotle's political thought.

¹³ Aristotle writes 'The debt...has a friendly aspect (*philikon*) in its deferral of payment' (1162b22-25).

friendship transfers into the public realm, where a similar disposition promotes just outcomes in more formal situations.¹⁴ Similarly, since friendship partly consists in a series of friendly attitudes and dispositions, and justice relies on these, what is seen as just in a particular case is influenced by the kinds of relationship involved.¹⁵

The reverse claim – that friendship has no need of justice – suggests that friendship gives rise to ethical conduct in contexts where the demands of justice appear tangential, inappropriate or superfluous – i.e., in the realm of personal relationships. Either friendship somehow does the work of justice, serving as an alternative way of achieving its aims, or it removes the need to consciously confront the central problem of justice – to reflectively determine what is owed, what another’s good consists in, or what constitutes fairness.

Friendship does the work of justice because, as already noted, it presupposes a willingness to give (due) consideration to others’ interests, a motivation to respond to them and a concern or regard for their good. This means that, in friendships, justice does not typically appear as an additional or external obligation that one must motivate oneself to meet. In being friends with another, one tends to treat them justly (although reflection on this is sometimes needed). In addition, friends are also inclined to find ways of interacting such that questions of desert and calculative judicial processes do not arise. The subtlety and responsiveness that arise in a relationship usually render these unnecessary. In summary, the implication is that friendship can achieve desirable outcomes such as shared agreement and well-being, as well as fair distribution; and its absence would require more structured judgments and explicit procedures that bring with them higher possibility of error and discontent.¹⁶

¹⁴ Irwin (1985, p.273) also suggests that Aristotle’s account of decency is the best way to make sense of the claim that friendship is needed for justice.

¹⁵ VIII.11, for example, can be read as suggesting that the claims of justice vary with the type of the personal relationship. The justice appropriate between ruler and subject or father and son is different from justice between husband and wife. VIII.12 summarises this idea thus: ‘How should a man conduct his life toward his wife or, in general, toward a friend? That appears to be the same as asking how they are to conduct their lives justly. For what is just is not the same for a friend toward a friend as toward a stranger, or the same toward a companion as toward a classmate’ (trans. Irwin, 1985, p. 134).

¹⁶ But see Card (1990, p83) for a slightly different interpretation of this passage. Card takes the distinction between friendship and justice in this passage to be that justice means enforcement, while emphasizing that friendship has internal to it dispositions of fairness that do not require external sanction in order to determine conduct. One problem with Card’s reading is that while the issue of enforcement of fair

These varied ways in which friendship induces the appropriate kind of conduct make clear why it was necessary for justice; they also invite the thought that it was a more fundamental *ethical* practice or set of practices than justice. The composition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* also hints at such relative importance: justice fills one book, friendship two. Putting things in that way might be a little too strong – clearly, Aristotle’s account of ethical living extends beyond his discourse of friendship. Other elements are necessary for *eudaimonia*, including the possession of non-moral goods such health, wealth and beauty; the possession of intellectual and practical virtues; and the creation of excellent laws. Nevertheless, there are reasons to think that, for Aristotle, friendship is at least as important as justice in the creation of an ethical life.

2.2 Kant on Friendship and justice

By the time of the European enlightenment, however, a very different view of friendship, justice and the relationship between the two had emerged. This inverted their order of importance, with friendship now clearly external and subservient to justice. Kant’s writings about friendship offer one example of the reduced importance of friendship to ethical living. While Aristotle’s devotes one fifth of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship, Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* offers only a little more than two pages on the subject (1991a, pp. 214-6). Kant’s scepticism about the centrality of friendship to ethical life is clear from the first line of his Lecture of friendship: ‘Friendship’, Kant says, ‘is the hobby-horse of all rhetorical moralists; it is nectar and ambrosia to them.’ (1991b, p210). Friendship no longer has a central role in producing ethical conduct; rather ‘Friendship develops the minor virtues of life’ (p.217). Two features of Kant’s discussion of friendship make particularly clear its division from and subservience to justice, and its tenuous link to morality.

Firstly, friendship is no longer understood as making a direct practical contribution to ensuring ethical conduct in the social world (by, for example, its impact on interpersonal attitudes and in sensitizing individuals to particular features of those with whom they interact); it is now presented as an abstract ideal – ‘considered in its

standards is common in contemporary discussions of justice, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* at least, Aristotle does not discuss enforcement in his treatment of justice and friendship.

perfection' (1991a, p. 261) – applicable only to interaction between two private individuals. Friendship, among other things, has become an ideal of equal exchange of love and respect between two people. Such an ideal cannot be realised in everyday life, however: 'friendship is only an idea...and unattainable in practice' (p. 261). This is because, Kant suggests, internal to friendship is a serious epistemological problem. It is impossible to know how much the other loves oneself and thus impossible to reciprocate one's love in equal measure. Deprived of a guide to judge what is fair, friendship can become a site of unethical conduct, because the motivation of self-love relentlessly threatens to undermine the disposition to love others and to shape the relationship.

In addition, Kant's limited view of what counts as ethical motivation (namely, respect for the moral law) and his corresponding identification of all other motivations with inclinations further accentuates this danger of self-centredness. Thus friendship guides action, in so far as it is able to, by functioning as an abstract concept, a general thought about balance or reciprocity; but its vagueness, coupled with its opaque relation to motivation undermine this as a reliable practical ideal.

Second, and more worryingly, friendship even contains the seeds of unethical action. It threatens to undermine a moral ideal: that of respect. As noted, Kant holds that friendship consists in the balancing of love and respect. But affection and love, resulting as they do in action for the sake of another, and lacking a standard to determine due measure, create indebtedness and a sense of being in the other's patronage – in short, a loss of respect, both for oneself (in the case of beneficiary) and for the other (in the case of the benefactor).

Worse still, Kant also explains friendship in terms of disclosure and the sharing of personal information (1991, p. 214-5) and these also lead to a loss of respect – due to excess in revealing one's inner self and traits that results in humiliation.¹⁷ Thus integral to Kant's account of friendship is a limit on its practice in order to avoid violating this key moral ideal: 'the principle of respect requires them (friends) to stay at a proper distance from each other' (1991a, p.261). At the same time, Kant locates justice on a more secure

¹⁷ Kant writes: 'Even to our best friends we must not reveal ourselves, in our natural state as we know it to ourselves. To do so would be loathsome.' (1991, p. 215).

footing – in the realm of pure practical reason and respect for the moral law – and makes it central to ethical living (I return to Kant’s conception of justice in 3.3 below).

Thus we might conclude that, for Kant, friendship has no obvious connection to justice, and might even undermine it. The conduct of friendship lacks a measure of fairness (a form of justice), and if respect for all individuals is seen as the basis for moral judgement and moral justification, then friendship in its particularity undermines this conception of justice, too. For Kant, the normative priority of friendship and justice has been reversed.

The two thinkers’ radically different evaluations of friendship are striking, puzzling even. How could the two thinkers value a widespread and common feature of human experience so differently, each reversing the order of priority between it and justice?

3. Resolving the puzzle: why Kant and Aristotle viewed the ethical status of friendship so differently

Three points help to explain these contrasting assessments of friendship. These are: the importance of *philia*, that evaluations of friendship derive from prior assumptions about what constitutes ethical living, and Kant’s commitment to moral justification as the foundation of ethical conduct.

3.1 *Philia*, not friendship

The simplest explanation of the discrepancy arises from the translation of the original Greek term *philia*. Although commonly translated as ‘friendship’, the original Greek term had a much broader meaning than the familiar contemporary idea of close and private friendship. Aristotle’s *philia* includes, among other things, kinship relationships, fellow citizens, relations of unequal social standing and relationships of trade and utility.¹⁸ Kant, however, typically discusses friendship in a more restricted sense, largely as a dyadic relationship, a close voluntary and private association between

¹⁸ For a detailed philological analysis of *philia*, see Gabriel Harman (2010). Harman suggest the term be translated by less precise neologisms such as ‘amity, sociality or propensity to socialization’ (p.51).

two people.¹⁹ Thus, in so far as they describe different phenomena, this would explain the different conclusions regarding the ethical status of ‘friendship’. I will discuss the importance of the *philia* shortly.

3.2 Differing conceptions of ethical life; different assessments of friendship

A second explanation is that the two thinkers’ perceptions of friendship were conditioned by prior normative commitments derived from their ethical theories. As the latter differed, so did the resulting assessments of friendship. Their respective conceptions of ethical conduct drew on detailed metaphysical commitments regarding the nature of self, agency and well-being.

For Aristotle, the realm of the ‘ethical’ is structured by the goal of individual flourishing. It is commonplace to note that ‘ethics’ comes from ‘ethos’ or character. Friendship is attributed a central role in ethical living because it secures this goal of personal flourishing. It does this in various ways: it satisfies needs, allows for the exercise of excellences and is a source of pleasure. Friendship is ‘most necessary for our life’ (1155a). But for Aristotle friendship is not merely instrumental to flourishing; it is also partly constitutive of it. The practices of friendship themselves also partly define how flourishing is understood. This can be seen most clearly in IX.9, where Aristotle presents a perceptual and experiential dimension of flourishing that friendship uniquely satisfies.

In the discussions of character friendship in IX.9, a close friend is presented as another self. The importance of another self, a close friend, to flourishing is not clearly stated in the text, but can be understood as follows. The perception of an excellent character leads to enhanced self-knowledge and is a source of valuable pleasure. These partly constitute flourishing. However, one cannot adequately observe one’s own (excellent) character. In lieu of this, one must perceive another’s excellent character, sufficiently similar to oneself. Since such perception is needed for flourishing and friends are needed for such perception then friends are a constitutive element of flourishing.

¹⁹ He does, however, also briefly mention the ‘friend of humanity’ as someone, ‘who takes an affective interest in the wellbeing of all men and will never disturb it without heartfelt regret’ (1991, p.264).

Friendship is necessary for ethical living, not merely permissible.²⁰ Interestingly, this highest form of friendship suggests that *eudaimonia* is achieved locally and experientially (phenomenologically), with friendship a medium through which it is realised.²¹

In contrast to Aristotle's sociality, Kant considers the foundation of moral conduct to derive from the rational autonomy of the noumenal self. For the individual to be truly autonomous no heterodox influences can determine action. The individual must be his or her own law-giver; and since the form of a law is to be exceptionless this leads to the Categorical Imperative, the moral law. Kant sees limited 'ethical' worth in friendship because it is only tangentially related to such a moral law. Such a standard is expressive of the respect due to all persons, by virtue of their rational capacities, and also provides a clear and public standard to structure practical deliberation. For Kant, 'ethical living' thus refers to the moral subject who attains a purity of intention, whose will is determined by the moral law. Within this conception of ethical conduct, personal attachments and their accompanying affective states have little direct relevance. They might be deemed permissible in so far as they accord with formal practical reasoning; equally, they might undermine a commitment to ethical conduct, as when self-love determines action or when love for someone results in treating a third party as a means and not an end. Kant's moral framework thus leaves little scope for recognising friendships as a form of ethical conduct.

3.3 Moral theory and moral justification as the foundation of ethical conduct

A particular feature of Kant's general conception of ethical conduct provides the final explanation of the differing assessments of friendship. This is the emergence in Kant's work of a distinctive account of justice. Justice is treated in narrow terms,

²⁰ A similar argument to IX.9 can be found in the Alcibiades, making clear the importance of good friends for flourishing, on account of how they are needed to help a soul to attain knowledge. The following extract of the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades nicely summarises the point:

S: If the inscription took our eyes to be men and advised them, 'See thyself,' how would we understand such advice? Shouldn't the eye be looking at something in which it could see itself? A: Obviously. [...]
S: I'm sure you've noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the 'pupil', for it's a sort of miniature of the man who's looking. A: You're right. [...]
S: So if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs, and this, I presume, is seeing. A: That's right.
S: Then if the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occur and at anything else which is similar to it (Alcibiades. 132d5-133b10; tr. Hutchinson).

²¹ I return to this point in chapter four, when I discuss the role of friendship in creating affective and aesthetic experiences or events.

understood as an ideal principle that confers justification on a specific action. Further, Kant takes the existence of a single, specific and public conception of moral justification as both the basis for and the definitive feature of ethical conduct. This form of justice-as-justification is expressed as the Categorical Imperative. Justice in its most fundamental form becomes an abstract standard that can be applied to any action by any person unilaterally, in an intellectual judgement. At the same time, such justice is characterized by the breadth of consideration required by the principle. It requires that action be related to the interests or values of all members of a universal constituency (such as all rational agents), and that actions be acceptable to all other people.²² In contrast, friendship bears no relation to such a constituency and is marginalized as an ethical phenomenon. Further, the sociability and interpersonal attitudes that Aristotle regarded as central to justice and which friendship provided are no longer required. Emotions and other psychological states threaten to obstruct pure justice.

These three points – *Philia*, different conceptions of the ethical conduct and justice-as-justification as the central feature of ethical conduct – explain why friendship ceased to be central to ethical life. But they also raise important questions about friendship and ethical conduct. Becoming aware of how existing beliefs about ethical conduct influence assessments of friendship invites renewed reflection on its ethical significance. For example, such awareness makes one wonder whether popular contemporary ideas about friendship might tacitly reflect unarticulated commitments to certain contemporary values or ideals of intimacy, equality and the voluntary.²³

Further, it raises the prospect of friendship being extracted from prior philosophical and ethical commitments – and not only those of Kant and Aristotle – and examined ‘independently’. Starting from an investigation of the features of friendship, we can reverse the priority and develop a conception of ethical living from an understanding of friendship. Such a project fits with a powerful intuition of the intrinsic value of

²² As I understand Kant it is the fact that one’s conduct is determined by mere modality – by the *possibility* of adopting a principle universally, applicable to all, that forms the basis for a powerful justification.

²³ See Alan Silver (1997) for a discussion of ways of thinking about friendship (as well as other personal relationships and ideals such as love) available now that were not in earlier eras and, similarly, ways of conducting friendship in earlier eras might now seem alien and even un-friendly. For an extended study of how certain early modern forms of friendship and friendly conduct can disappear from popular conceptions of friendship, see Bray (2006).

friendship that motivates some contemporary objections to current accounts of justice and moral theory (discussed below).

This project might draw on something like the category of *Philia*. Why the concept of *philia* disappeared from the philosophical realm would require a complex historical and sociological inquiry. But the question can be posed philosophically, as an exasperated and rhetorical ‘Why?’ *Philia*, or something analogous to it, might still be an important ethical category: that is, a series of personal relationships, understood in terms of their associated practices and friendly attitudes, and which share certain family resemblances.²⁴ We return to this in chapter II.

A conception of ethical conduct that starts from *philia* or friendship broadly construed could both draw on Aristotle and Kant while being importantly distinct. For example, it would grant personal relationships a greater role in articulating ethical living than Aristotle did, while sympathizing with much that he says about *philia*. However, as philosophers have come to question his overarching ethical vision as excessively focused on a person’s own well-being or founded on suspect biological essentialism, so treating *philia* independently of that vision gains credibility.

To take *philia* as a starting point is also to focus on a relatively narrow set of motivations as being at the core of ethical conduct – namely, those people with whom we share, or can imagine ourselves sharing, some kind of personal relationship. But equating ethical conduct with a narrow range of possible motivational states is not new in moral philosophy; we have just seen how Kant himself believed that ethical conduct derives from just one type of moral motivation – a motivating respect for the moral law. But to treat the motivations inherent in *philia* as an ethical foundation has one advantage over Kant’s account. It is much easier to locate and cultivate the motivation for ethical conduct in the case of *philia*, since these inhere in familiar experiences in everyday life – arising

²⁴ My aim is not to address the question of how Aristotle or the Greeks understood *philia*, but only to consider how thinking about friendship in this broader sense might reveal new answers to a question such as, ‘How should one live?’. For work dealing with the former task, see A.W. Price (1990); and for more recent discussion, see the Greco-Roman Antiquity section of the conference proceedings of ‘Conceptualising Friendship’, International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden (2010).

with regard to personal attachments. This contrasts with the difficulty of clearly articulating and identifying a respect for the moral law in all subjects.²⁵

It might be thought that the motivations integral to personal relationships are too narrow and too parochial to be the basis for a conception of ethical living. But the relevant motivational features of *philia* are not only less, in the sense of being restricted to certain features of the world around, i.e., people; they are also more, in the variety of kinds of motivational states that this entails. The motivations integral to *philia* could be thought of in limited ways, such as acting for those one loves and promoting (only) their ends. But the motivations of *philia* are more sophisticated than this and can give rise to motivational dispositions that have much wider applications than one's nearest and dearest. One example of this is the motivation to be well-regarded by those one knows personally and holds in high esteem. This can have an impact on a potentially wide range of conduct, beyond how one treats friends. Admittedly, this might seem like a contingent motivation; and indeed it is. This might trouble those who insist that all should matter equally and unconditionally. But that might be an ideal for which people persistently lack the relevant motivation, and to realise it as a practical ideal might require the assistance of more parochial motivations, such as those found in *philia*.

Before any such project is undertaken however, we must deal with the implications of the third explanation offered above for the reduced status of friendship. This is the turn to moral theory that treats justice as justification, understands the latter as a single abstract principle, and treats it as the foundation of ethical conduct.²⁶ Here, friendship has no role in shaping moral justification or ethical conduct.

The implications of this particular conception of justice extend beyond Kant's own work. It has been influential in the emergence of a particular type of modern moral theory. Here, I follow Bernard Williams in identifying a distinct subset of ethical theory, and describe it as 'modern moral theory'. Williams defines such moral theory as 'a theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which... *implies a general*

²⁵ Even if Kant himself believed the moral law was apparent to the individual, later Kantians have not been so confident. Christine Korsgaard, for example, shares the Kantian commitment to universal regard for all persons as the basic standard for justifying conduct, but sees the need to offer an argument for this that begins from a person's concrete practical identity – their social role or self-conception (1996).

²⁶ On this account, for example, empathy and the process of dialogue have no foundational status in justification. Similarly, justification is assumed to be the defining feature of ethical conduct. See Marilyn Friedman (2000, p. 398). I return to this in chapter two.

test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles' (1985, p. 72, italics added).²⁷ This test for correctness is particularly important, as it represents the same heightened concern with moral justification that is expressed in Kant's work. The Categorical Imperative is one such test, but other modern moral theories such as consequentialism and contractualism, also rely on a foundational test for rightness. The latter takes securing the consent of any reasonable agent as the basis for justification.²⁸ Although differing over the precise form of the justification, these theories share this commitment to a single and explicitly moral form of justification, rooted in a universal constituency, and which generates explicitly *moral* judgments.

This commitment to such a conception of justice, as an explicitly moral justification, troubles those contemporary philosophers who approach ethical living by starting from human well-being or flourishing, to which personal relationships are integral. They see a conflict between justice-as-justification and well-being. Those interested in building a picture of ethical living that starts from friendship or *philia*, and reasserting its direct connection with justice, are concerned to save friendship from the marginalization that such a conception of justification implies. Let us now examine how such anti-moral theory arguments proceed.

²⁷ In this work I will use Williams' distinction between moral theory and ethical theory. 'Ethical theory', 'ethical conduct' or 'conception of ethical living' refer to the general task of thinking about how to order human conduct: what kinds of thoughts, if any, should guide our actions? This means focusing on and foregrounding certain concepts that might collectively present an account of ethical living, while placing less emphasis on others. Such 'theorising' could conclude that self-interest is most ethical; it might even conclude that no comprehensive account of ethical living is possible. Nor is it necessarily committed to producing a single account of right action or of justification (though it does not rule it out). In what follows, I explore how the practices of friendship might constitute such an ethical theory. Such theory is distinct from narrower 'Moral theory', which takes a single conception of right action and moral justification as both desirable and also the foundation of ethical living.

²⁸ There is little in the literature on the relationship between friendship and contractualism. Although see Rahul Kumar (1999) for a relevant discussion of contractualist ethics. In so far as contractualism is understood as the search for agreement among self-interested actors in the Hobbesian or, arguably, in the Rawlsian sense, there might be grounds for arguing that such self-interest is incompatible with friendship, since at least some important forms of friendship take the pursuit of self-interest to be inimical to friendship. However, to the extent that contractualism emphasises reaching agreement between persons in relationships (as Kumar discusses) then the contrast between it and friendship seems less; indeed, it prefigures much of what I have to say about the role of relationships in ethical conduct.

4. Contemporary disputes between friendship and moral theory

The historical disagreement about the ethical standing of friendship, illustrated here by Kant and Aristotle, has not been resolved. The contemporary ‘pro-friendship’ camp argue, in a manner consistent with and sometimes explicitly guided by Aristotle, that modern moral theories cannot accommodate friendship. These ‘pro-friendship’ arguments typically share a common structure, which might be summarised as:

- i. Friendship is a necessary part of ethical life.
- ii. Any viable account of ethical life must thus be able to accommodate friendship.
- iii. Moral theory x offers an account of ethical life.
- iv. A subject whose actions are determined by moral theory x is a subject incapable of genuine friendship.
- v. Therefore, moral theory x is to be rejected as an account of the ethical life.²⁹

The pro-friendship camp seeks to challenge theories that, they claim, are insensitive to the value of friendship and which make acting for or out of friendship subservient to their own conceptions of how a person ought to act.³⁰ Through the rejection of modern moral theories, the pro-friendship camp thus seeks to restore friendship to a more central place in ethical life.

Are arguments of this type successful? Is a subject guided by such moral theories incapable of friendship? I believe these various arguments fail because they share a common flaw: they fail to demonstrate a clear conceptual, motivational or practical conflict between the moral subject depicted by the respective ethical theory and a subject capable of friendship. They fail to establish that the practices of friendship require the rejection of such theoretical stipulations of right action and fairness.³¹

²⁹ Establishing that moral theories fail to account for friendship and so are inadequate as accounts of human life, does not establish that friendship itself is ethical; this requires further argument (discussed in the third, fourth and fifth chapters). Some pro-friendship writers have not claimed friendship as a moral phenomenon (hence they reject i. above), and have instead portrayed friendship as a non-moral but important value or practice that opposes ethical values or conduct in general. See Kennett and Cocking (2000). However, the basic argumentative structure (ii.-v. above) is the same: friendship is used to problematise common conceptions of ethical conduct.

³⁰ The distinction between acting for the sake of a friend and acting out of friendship is discussed by Michael Stocker (1993); its significance will be made clear in the next chapter.

³¹ Despite this failure, in the next chapter, I will suggest there are other reasons why we can legitimately resist the priority accorded to moral theories’ conceptions of justification and ethical conduct.

Let us consider three versions of these arguments for incompatibility of modern moral theory and friendship: the threat to well-being argument, the conflicting motives argument and the deep conflict argument.

4.1 The threat to well-being argument

One kind of pro-friendship argument is what I will call the *threat to well-being* argument. This is the argument that acting in accord with the demands of moral theory threatens to undermine personal commitments such as friendship and thus personal well-being.

In his article ‘Persons, Character, Morality’, Bernard Williams argues that a certain degree of motivational force (desire) is necessary to make human life worthwhile. Specifically, for Williams, this means that an individual life must have a sufficient degree of coherence and purpose – must have what William’s calls ‘ground projects’ (1976, p. 209) – in order for a subject to find *any* action worthwhile. For any person, such ground projects ‘propel him forward; thus they give him, in a certain sense, a reason for living his life.’ (p.211). Fortunately, an individual life typically does have its own particular character, with a distinctive nexus of desires ‘propelling’ the subject forward through time. And personal relationships are or can be one such project (p. 213).

However, Williams claims, deliberating and acting in accord with moral theory can undermine such projects and, in extremis, individual well-being. This is due to their effect on the subject’s motivations and desires. Moral theory introduces into the subject’s deliberation a series of practical demands about how to view and select action. But, tellingly, such a framework for organising action is ultimately not sensitive to the existing desires of the subject, but rather makes its own demands of the subject. As part of the subject’s projects, the motivations that arise in personal relationships are similarly subjugated. And this, it is claimed, cannot be a reasonable demand to make of a person.

In Williams’ words:

There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around that world at all (Williams, 1976,p. 210).

Such restrictions and additional forces placed on the subject threaten to erase or undermine the subject’s desires and their function of propelling him forwards and

motivating him to act *at all*. But the presence of some motivation is a precondition of any action, including moral action. This means that moral theories can potentially be self-defeating, removing the motivation (and hence the ability) to bring about what they demand. In order to sustain basic motivations, it thus might be necessary to contradict or ignore the demands of moral theory and act for personal relationships.

Thus, for Williams, the demands of ethical theories contain within them the seeds of a practical conflict: between moral conduct as they define it, and fundamental motivations that are necessary to any worthwhile life, which can include those pertaining to personal relationships.

Objections to the threat to well-being argument

However, it is doubtful whether the argument as it stands provides sufficient reason for rejecting moral theory or for according friendship a central role in ethical life. Firstly, one can wonder, as many have done,³² whether Williams overestimates the conflict between motivation and the demands of moral theory, and whether acting according to the latter threatens basic motivations to act or to live at all. Admittedly, Williams' argument does not claim a strict incompatibility between projects, including personal relationships, and the moral theories discussed. Rather, the argument warns of a danger or a risk inherent in acting in accord with moral theory – that it can undermine ground projects and the motivation to action. But such 'risk' implies only that conflict might arise between the two modes or ends of action, not that it necessarily will. This leaves open the possibility that moral theories, when properly articulated, avoid such conflict, by avoiding excessive demands on the person. To give just one example, consequentialists can argue that a commitment to producing the best consequences would not lead to self-neglect or undermine basic character and projects; rather, it would take ground projects and character as empirical data that partly determined any demands for action. That is to say, consequentialists simply build into their theory the belief that focusing on friends is constitutive of maximizing best consequences.³³

Thus, the possible tensions identified by Williams between personal projects and moral obligation could be kept within acceptable boundaries, limited to the kinds of

³² See for example, Adrian Piper (1987) and, especially Railton (1984), discussed below.

³³ Examples of consequentialists who respond in this way include Philip Pettit (1997) and Frank Jackson (1991).

dilemmas and difficult choices that are an ineliminable part of daily practical living. It is not obvious that there is a conflict here that requires the rejection of moral theory in order to preserve friendship or personal relationships.

But even if there were an important conflict between ground projects and moral theory, the implications of this for the ethical status of friendship are unclear, since Williams' account of projects gives no special explanatory weight to personal relationships. They are merely one kind of project. Presumably, a life could be structured around projects that did not include personal relationships and still oppose the demands of the moral subject. The conflict is thus between projects and moral theory, not friendship and moral theory. It requires further argument to show that personal relationships are a necessary or indispensable kind of project.³⁴

Further, it is debatable whether the idea of projects can capture what is distinctive about personal relationships as a kind of ethical value that can oppose the demands of the moral subject. Since the idea of a project is somewhat vague, much depends here on how 'project' is understood. If they are understood as quite determinate sets of desires, something like plans or blueprints for action or a series of ends that order a person's choices, then this fails to capture an important aspect of personal relationships. Personal relationships are often not conceived of in terms of pre-existing ends or goals, but have a less determinate form. For example, they are episodic, lacking a clear teleological structure: they can consist in unplanned or unexpected events that one participates in and enjoys, without obviously being part of a definite project. The way in which action is conceived or arrived at in such circumstances is often less clearly conceptualised than the term 'project' captures.³⁵ Thus, if projects are understood as (relatively) clearly conceived ends, they might not reflect the features of the friendship that drives the pro-friendship camp's objection to moral theory.

If, however, projects are understood more loosely, simply as any set of desires or motivations, possibly with only a minimal degree of coherence and order, then 'projects' arguably do describe the less structured or less 'thought out' aspect of personal

³⁴ Similarly, a person's ground projects might also involve acting in ways demanded by moral theory; they might be a moral saint. Whether or not this is desirable is debatable. For problems with the ideal of moral saints, see Susan Wolf (1982).

³⁵ I discuss such events in detail in chapter four.

relationships. At the very least, however, the ambiguity inherent in this account calls for a more detailed study of the features of friendship, while causing us to look for more convincing evidence of conflict between moral theory and friendship.

4.2 The conflicting motives argument

An alternative attempt to identify a more direct conflict between moral theory and friendship might be called the *conflicting motives argument*. This objection to moral theory focuses on the motives of the moral subject guided by moral theory and the motives of one who acts as a friend, and claims there is a *conceptual* conflict between the two. Michael Stocker (1976) argues that if the goods or principles we aim at are impersonal and our motivations are structured by moral theory then we cannot value individual people in their particularity, nor legitimately be motivated by them *qua* unique individuals. Thus in having the motivation to implement the demands of these theories we cannot have the motivations to act as friends. In Stocker's words:

Love, friendship, affection, fellow-feeling, and community...essentially contain certain motives and essentially preclude certain others: among those precluded we find motives comprising the justifications, the goals, the goods of those ethical theories most prominent today...To get these great goods while holding those current ethical theories requires a schizophrenia between reasons and motives (p.461).

Appealing to the motives constituting close relationships in order to object to the demands of moral theory is the most frequently rehearsed objection in the literature, and those who criticise impartiality as the basis for ethical justification make use of the same argument. For example, John Cottingham writes:

Friends and loved ones are *special* to us; we do not, and should not, assess their interests from the cold detached standpoint of the impartial observer, for to do so would be a repudiation of love. No ethical system worth its salt will attempt to require such impartiality from us in these contexts, on pain of making human fulfilment unattainable (1983, p.97).

To summarise, the motivations that arise within friendship, directed to the particular friend, are constitutive of well-being and should be taken as a legitimate basis for action; but these motives are threatened when we detach ourselves from them and attempt to see the situation differently, from a moral point of view.

Objections to the conflicting motives argument

Defenders of moral theory might respond to this charge of motivational conflict in several ways. Some would argue that friendship and its motives are being treated too simplistically, unquestioningly presented as a simple moral good. Moral theorists might

counter, friendship can be ethically problematic and it is thus appropriate to sometimes reflect on it and the motivations it engenders under that guidance of moral theory.³⁶

However, most moral theorists take a different approach. They accept that the motivation applicable to personal relationships should be particular and derived from unique individuals; but they insist that this is compatible with the moral theory they defend. In so far as morality and friendship do involve taking up two different perspectives in evaluating conduct, no significant conflict in motives is involved. The role of moral theory is to validate proposed ways of acting and sometimes, in a non-conflictual way, redirect motivations according to a standard or justification.

Accordingly, for example, Marcia Baron (1984) argues that the standpoint of impartiality, from within which situations are conceived impersonally, does not require the suppression of partial feelings for friends or accompanying motivations. This is because the role of moral theory is merely to guide the choosing of principles or rules for governing conduct from this impersonal standpoint, and the rules moral subjects would choose would endorse the practices and motives of friendship. Thus moral theory endorses highly personal motives without giving rise to conflicting motives.

Defenders of consequentialism also use this strategy. They claim that consequentialism does not require enduring and salient motivation to promote the best overall consequences; it requires only that one's actions do in fact bring about the best consequences. In this way, they remain non-committal about what motives are morally required; at times they might be highly personal. Peter Railton describes such a person as a *sophisticated consequentialist*:

[A] sophisticated consequentialist is someone who has a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life, but who need not set special stock in any particular form of decision making and therefore does not necessarily seek to lead a subjectively consequentialist life (1984, p.114).

So with regard to friendship, an individual can believe that it brings about the best overall states of affairs and can thereby genuinely engage in friendship – treating the other person as special. If there were reason to believe that one's friendship was not in

³⁶ Christine Korsgaard (1996) is one who makes this point. A related but different objection is raised by Simon Keller (2007, p.47). Keller argues that friendship induces its subjects to violate epistemic norms of belief formation, and that such sub-optimal behaviour gives us reason to doubt that friendship can be a simple good.

fact consistent with the moral commitment to bring about the best overall state of affairs then one would reconsider the friendship. But as long as the individual does not have this belief (and, in fact, they typically believe the contrary, that friendships generally tend to maximize value) then they can focus on the actual friendship. Thus, there are no conflicting motives, the sophisticated consequentialist defender claims. One's motives are partial and particular, yet at the same time, one's actions satisfy the demands of consequentialist theory.

As both the Kantian and Consequentialist responses suggest, it has not been conclusively shown that there is a conflict between the demands moral theory makes on motivation and the first person experiences of friendship; at least, no more than that experienced by any reflective person in the conduct of friendship. However, these attempts to defend moral theories have failed to satisfy some; they remain suspicious of the claim that they can operate one degree removed from everyday personal experiences, ordering conduct without disturbing friendship. Here I will consider two such arguments, which focus particularly on the sophisticated consequentialist reconciliation of friendship and moral theory.

4.3 The deep conflict argument

There has been much debate as to whether such a 'sophisticated consequentialist' can be a genuine friend. One particular form of objection, which I will call the *deep conflict argument*, claims that a kind of motivational or dispositional conflict remains, albeit one less apparent than suggested by the initial claims of conflicting motivations. Here I will discuss two ways this argument has been made.

The first argument starts by accepting that the sophisticated consequentialist has motivations often considered necessary for friendship, such as a genuine non-instrumental concern for another person. However, it claims that a commitment to consequentialism creates a disposition to act in a certain way which, although not typically manifest in a person's motivations, is incompatible with the dispositions required for friendship.³⁷ This can be illustrated in the following way.

³⁷ This argument is found in Dean Cocking and Justin Oakley (1995)

A commitment to a consequentialist form of moral justification creates certain dispositions to act (to promote best consequences), which might loosely be compared with the dispositions of a teacher, a doctor or a psychotherapist. The psychotherapist, for example, can take a genuine interest in the life of his patient (indeed, this might be a necessary condition of being a good mental health practitioner). Thus, at a given moment the psychotherapist's first-person, subjective experience can be that of goodwill and concern for the patient. Nevertheless, certain dispositions constitutive of being a good psychotherapist are active in his cognitive processes that distinguish this relationship from friendship. For example, after about an hour of listening to his patient, he might suddenly be aware that time is up and that another patient is waiting outside, as per his typical schedule. His attitude of attentive support changes accordingly. We might say that the role requirements of the psychotherapist condition his dispositions in such a way that the goodwill and concern will have clear points of termination, regardless of what he or she feels at a given moment. It is because of such dispositions and the limits they set to friendly feelings that the psychotherapist-client relationship cannot be a friendship.

The consequentialist's friendships are analogous to the psychotherapist's clients. At a given moment the consequentialist's consciousness might be dominated by genuine, non self-deceiving feelings of friendship. However, on account of his commitment to maximizing the good, his friendships are (without his typically being aware of it) structured around dispositions to promote the best consequences. Whenever it is apparent that the path of best consequences conflicts with the conduct of friendship, then the consequentialist will curtail or even terminate the friendship in favour of consequentialist commitments. This might never happen. But, it is claimed, a relationship that is effectively governed or limited by such dispositions, and the potential termination of a relationship implicit in them, cannot be genuine friendship; genuine friendship has no such termination conditions. But anyone who is sensitized to such conditions of termination (even if they never arise) cannot be a genuine friend. Consequentialism is, the argument concludes, incompatible with genuine friendship after all.³⁸

³⁸ Oakley and Cocking describe the conflict thus: '[T]he governing conditions applicable to the teacher and the doctor in these relationships were not compatible with those relationships being ones of friendship or love. Similarly...[a sophisticated consequentialist] who is governed by the consequentialist condition of maximizing agent-neutral value can be moved by quite distinct concerns – perhaps, for example, by

Objections to the deep conflict argument

The problem with this argument, however, is that it is unclear whether the consequentialist's having such dispositions is incompatible with having friendship. This can be seen by considering the disanalogy with the psychotherapist case. Where a relationship is clearly structured by role – where certain relatively concrete social norms are internalized and create certain dispositions to act – it is easy to see how such dispositions curtail action and how they will be called into play in the course of performing one's role, and will therefore structure and limit friendship. This explains why the psychotherapist cannot be a friend.

However, in the case of the consequentialist, it is not clear exactly how his disposition to maximize consequences relates to his immediate experience of (genuine) friendship. The consequentialist's dispositions are not structured by clear social roles or specific social norms, so it is unclear exactly what kinds of situation will trigger the consequentialist concern to maximize the good, curtailing friendship in a most unfriendly manner. In fact it is not clear that they ever will interfere with his friendship. After all, the sophisticated consequentialist enters a friendship believing genuinely that it does promote the best overall outcomes, and it is not clear what, if anything, will arise to change his mind. But if this is so, it is difficult to see how the consequentialist cannot be a genuine friend. Further, even genuine friendship has termination conditions – such as when an unexpected betrayal, even if it is out of character, undermines a previous close friendship. Genuine friendship is not unconditional, and consequentialist requirements might be similar to the implicit requirement to avoid disloyalty, betrayal and so on.

4.4 The second deep conflict argument

Neera Kapur Badhwar (1991) offers a different argument for why the sophisticated consequentialist cannot be a friend, based on a distinction between two kinds of motivation, instrumental and non-instrumental. Badhwar claims there is a logical incompatibility between the motivation internal to close or 'end' friendship, as she calls it,

particularistic care and concern for another – but that would not suggest that being governed in these ways is compatible with friendship or love' (1995, p. 96).

and the motivation that defines a committed consequentialist.³⁹ She explains the nature of this incompatibility thus:

If I accept C [all forms of consequentialism], the moral justification I must give for my friendship is instrumental. And acceptance of an instrumental justification of friendship, whether of particular acts of friendship, or the dispositions of friendship, is logically incompatible with the attitudes and motivations of end friendship, and so with friendship as an intrinsic value (Badhwar, p. 488).

Badhwar's argument starts from the idea that friendship consists in a certain kind of motivational structure and a certain way of ordering action. In friendship, one delights in a friend as a unique contribution to one's own life, and treats friends as ends in themselves. For an act to be an act of friendship its goals and motivations must be derived and directed towards only the friend and their good.⁴⁰ One cannot have further, additional motives or ends that extend beyond the friendship, which the 'friendly' act serves instrumentally; such acts would no longer be done out of friendship. Now, although committed sophisticated consequentialists also recognise friendship as a value and as a legitimate source of motivation, they must also be sensitive to a further consideration, one that extends beyond the friendship and is directed to a more general end: that of promoting the best overall consequences. To be a consequentialist is, sooner or later and in some form, to be sensitive to the effects of acting for a friend on the overall state of affairs. But this additional motivation and additional step in practical reasoning is incompatible with friendship. Close friendship does not involve motivations that make its acts done for it or its continuation conditional on such further, external considerations. It is this extended motivational sensitivity that makes the consequentialist logically or conceptually incapable of close friendship.⁴¹ In contrast, argues Badhwar, friendship is an intrinsic moral good that, by itself, constitutes a form of morally justified action.

³⁹ '[E]ven if there is no psychological incompatibility between the acceptance of a plausible version of C [all forms of consequentialism] on the one hand, and commitment to friendship on the other, there is still a logical incompatibility between them' (Badhwar, 1991 p. 487).

⁴⁰ There are of course friends whom one views primarily as means to some further end; two people might find each other mutually useful and reasonably and respectfully use each other to satisfy their individual needs; however, Badhwar ignores such friendships of utility.

⁴¹ This argument is distinct from the conflicting motive argument above, because there is no claim of a crude conflict - it accepts that the consequentialist can have highly personal motivations. However, according to Badhwar's argument, the problem arises because these are not the only motivations determining action. Motivations pertaining to consequentialist justification also structure action. And this, the argument suggests, is one motivation too many. Friendship demands a purity of motive – acting without such wider consideration of consequences.

Objections to the second deep conflict argument

Badhwar's argument against the possibility of a consequentialist friend fails, however, because it presents too idealistic a picture of friendship. As a strict logical or formal claim of inconsistency it appears incorrect, since instrumental motivation is compatible with close friendship. Even in close friendship a friend is sometimes treated instrumentally. One sometimes asks a friend for help with one's own projects or needs, and the formal or logical structure of such action appears instrumental. If my house starts to flood and I call a friend to come round quickly and help salvage things, the friend is meeting an end that is outside of the friendship. Such assistance however, does not invalidate the friendship as a close one. Of course, there must be a limit to how often we impose on friends and to what degree. Still, I think the example undermines the claim of a logical or conceptual conflict; it suggests Badhwar's definition of close friendship was too narrow. It can accommodate a range of motivations and ways of interacting that extend beyond merely acting to promote a friend's good.

There is a further problem with claiming a logical incompatibility between friendship and consequentialism on the grounds that consequentialism involves considering factors strictly external to the friendship. Namely, close friendships are typically subject to justifications external to the friendship, without this disqualifying them as close friendship. For example, a person might reflect at length on whether to relocate to a distant place for a new desirable job or whether to decline and stay in the same place for the sake of existing friendship. Here, the worth of friendship is subject to evaluation, and something like a justification, that is external to the friendship (drawing on a person's interests broadly construed). But this does not imply that the original friendship was inauthentic; it shows only that we, in fact, do sometimes subject it to external justifications in a world of complex goods and difficult choices. Again, Badhwar's claim of inconsistency relies on too narrow or pure a conception of friendship.

Perhaps, however, Badhwar's argument should be understood not as a logical claim but as one about justification; namely, that the justification of friendship does not rest on any considerations outside of the friendship itself, such as whether it promotes the best overall consequences. To act for the sake of a friend just is to act with sufficient

justification. There is, I think, something important in this line of argument, and I return to this in the next chapter.

Badhwar's conception of such justification is problematical, however. That an action is done for friendship (e.g., for the sake of the friend) is, by itself, an inadequate justification of action. Many actions done for the sake of a friend are ethically questionable and not obviously justified, such as stealing, lying, bullying and so on.⁴² But if friendship is not a justifying force simpliciter, but rather acts of friendship are justified, if at all, in a more complex way, then it is not clear that the justification of acts done for friends conflicts with moral theory. A full account of the relevant form of justification might, as the argument stands, involve appeal to moral theory. Further argument is needed as to why it would or should not.

In conclusion, both of these 'deep conflict' arguments fail to show a conflict between friendship and moral theory; at least one form of such theory – consequentialism – might still be compatible. Both arguments attempted to conceptualise friendship in specific ways – as a certain structure of dispositions or as a certain structure of motivation and ends of practical reasoning – but neither definition seems to adequately represent friendship; and the limitations of these representations undermines their arguments.

5. Summary of the argument so far

Several arguments for the incompatibility of friendship and modern moral theory, with its precise stipulation of moral justification, were considered. None have been successful. As things stand, the claim that ethical living is founded on a single clear and public conception of moral justification (of the kind outlined by Kant) retains its authority. Such justification can endorse many acts done for friendship but denies that friendship itself has any ultimate or intrinsic ethical value. Friendship, as merely one of many goods, takes its place within an ethical life that is defined by the fundamental account of moral justification represented by moral theory.

⁴² Badhwar seems to recognise this when she writes. 'Friendship might be renounced for moral reasons that are external to friendship' (1991, p. 500).

There is, I suggest, a reason why this argumentative strategy of the pro-friendship camp failed. It sought to define friendship in order to derive a practical or conceptual contradiction with moral theory. However, it is very difficult to define friendship, and many definitions are question begging.⁴³ The historical evolution of the term described earlier indicates as much.

In this final section, I want to demonstrate more directly the diversity of relationships referred to by 'friendship' and hence of possible definitions of the term. To show this, I sketch some 'antinomies' of friendship: definitions of friendship that are, at least superficially, contradictory. This conceptual tangle will give us reason to take more seriously a more general category of *philia*, or friendship-like personal relationships considered as a series of family resemblances.

6. The difficulties of defining friendship

Two problems with attempts to define friendship generically can be identified; roughly these are: the difficulties of finding an adequate definition, and the artificiality or remoteness of any definition from the everyday practices of friendship. Let us turn to the first.

Historically, many definitions of friendship have been offered. Competing definitions of friendship could be a sign of vigorous debate and progress, suggesting that sooner or later a satisfactory account of friendship will be articulated. However, two points are worth noting about such attempts. The first is that the necessary features identified vary greatly. Mutual goodwill, caring, shared interests, disclosure of personal information, practical assistance, instrumental need, shared projects, good character, similarity, and an openness to being directed by the other have all been offered as the distinctive characteristic of friendship.⁴⁴ The sheer variety and the fact that many of these supposed 'key' features are unrelated are themselves an indication of the difficulty of defining friendship and what is valuable about it. But stronger evidence of the difficulty

⁴³ Plato's discussion of such definitions in the *Lysis* warns us of this problem: the dialogue ends (like most Socratic dialogues) without resolving the question of what *philia* is.

⁴⁴ Some writers have combined these in an account of necessary and sufficient conditions. See, for example, Telfer (1970) and Deutsch (1994, pp. 15-27).

of articulating personal relationships can be extracted from these definitions: the presence of *contradictory definitions*. Consider three examples.

Reciprocity is both necessary for friendship and a threat to it. Reciprocity is often understood as some measure of equal giving and receiving and also of mutually experienced caring, liking or goodwill. A concern with it is often associated with ideals such as respect, equality and even justice and it is seen to be crucial to the maintenance of friendship and the prevention of domination and exploitation. Yet, at the same time, a concern with reciprocity as ‘book keeping’, equal measure or a clear sense of what has been given or what is owed is also thought to be incompatible with friendship. The highest form of friendship is a relationship in which no such awareness is present. For example, Adam Smith understood ‘reciprocity’ as applying to the equal and unforced exchange that satisfied material needs, thereby creating a ‘leisurely’ space for non-exchange based, reciprocity-indifferent friendship to emerge.⁴⁵ Thus, sometimes reciprocity is necessary for a personal relationship, sometimes it is a barrier to one; the subject of friendship is called to be aware of reciprocity, and yet not aware. This uncertainty about when to appeal to the concept in a relationship and to what degree it should structure interaction suggests reciprocity is not a reliable concept for defining friendship.

There is also uncertainty as to whether friendship leads its subjects towards truth, or away from it. On one traditional account of the function and value of friendship, it is seen as instrumental in securing wisdom: personal interaction is necessary to attain knowledge. For example, as we saw in our discussion of *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, Greek literature claims that gaining knowledge of one’s own soul (or mind) requires access to the soul of another. However, arguments for the opposite claim have also been made about friendship: on account of its affective ties, it induces false belief, and so is inimical to wisdom. According to Simon Keller (2007), for example, friendship leads to false belief, since it serves as a kind of stimulus to want to believe, to be optimistic about friends, in a way insufficiently sensitive to the evidence. When a friend asks whether

⁴⁵ Derrida also presents alternatives to reciprocity as a distinguishing feature of friendship. He understands the emphasis on reciprocity as having a particular historical origin, what he calls the ‘Greco-Roman model’, where friendship is inseparable from ideals of political concord. Derrida’s alternative to reciprocity is not the separation of economic life from the private (Adam Smith), but the recognition within the personal of asymmetrical relationships (Derrida, p. 643-4, 1988).

their poetry recital was good or not, a friend is inclined to form the belief that it was good, possibly without adequate attention to reality. Here, too, contradictory statements about the properties of friendship highlight the difficulty of defining it.

The final example of contradiction concerns the relation between friendship and the family. Friendship is understood both as a relationship that is independent of the family, contrasting with family relationships in important ways, and as one importantly like or dependent on family relationships. According to the latter view, the capacity for friendship arises from, and in some sense is analogous to, experiences and engagement in the family. It is through coming to care about and learning how to interact with family members that one learns to be a friend; and how one views or feels about a friend is also a reflection of feelings for family. The Confucian tradition is one source of this view. Against this, contemporary writers such as Michael Foucault (1981) and Marilyn Friedman (1993) have promoted friendship as a relationship that avoids and ameliorates problems generated within the family. The family is a social construction that can propagate ingrained historical injustice,⁴⁶ while friendships are freely chosen relationships, offering communities of mutual support independent of family life.

Further examples of contradictory definitions are possible. Many insist that friendship is based on disclosure and sharing of personal information (Lawrence Thomas 1993), *pace* Kant's view that disclosure can undermine respect. Even Aristotle, whose account of friendship is often taken as authoritative, can be challenged. His definition of mutual goodwill is contradicted by a Nietzschean account of friendship that emphasises mutual challenge or competition as the basis for friendship.⁴⁷ Admittedly, these examples cannot serve as conclusive proof that the 'essence' of friendship cannot be defined, but the sheer diversity in conceptions of friendship is important evidence. It explains the pro-friendship camp's struggle to articulate a clear conflict with moral theory.

The second problem with an attempt to define friendship is the artificial nature of the enterprise; it results in a reductive account of its features that is distant from the everyday experiences of friendship. Any definition might fail to capture what matters

⁴⁶ For an example of such an account see Susan Moller Okin (1991).

⁴⁷ See Alan Watt (2007).

subjectively to someone involved in a relationship, and thus can fail to correspond with the actual practices and interactions that constitute the relationship. Consider the analogous case of ‘person’.⁴⁸

Attempts to define it are controversial and disputed; yet even without agreeing on a definition, people are able to make use of the term. Further, not only are attempts to define person precisely not useful, they can even be dangerous. When stipulatively defined, philosophers can, in a superficially logical way, determine who are persons and who are not. This enables, for example, a distinction between young infants or those with advanced dementia, which are not persons, and various other kinds of ‘rational’ humans, who are. This has far-reaching political implications, serving as a basis for policy decisions. The need to create such a definition can sometimes be justified on pragmatic or expedient grounds, as when scarce resources must be distributed reasonably. But in daily life and practices, other people are not experienced in this way, nor is there any initial or intuitive attempt to delimit human beings in this way.⁴⁹ We typically deal with other humans as complex, feature-rich people, without such theoretically informed distinctions.

Something similar applies in friendship. We do not seek a definition of friendship in order to conduct or improve friendships. Even if a person formulated a generic definition it is not clear whether or how that would affect the relationship – whether conduct would follow the definition. Distinctions in relationships are sometimes made; for example, between close friend and mere acquaintance. But these are intuitive rather than based on clear conceptual distinctions. Thus, while definitions in some areas of social life might be helpful or needed – such as attempts to substantiate regulative ideals or define clear standards to guide social and political interaction – it is not clear whether friendship needs such unified theoretical stipulation.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ I base this analogy on Bernard Williams’ discussion of ‘person’ (1985, pp. 114-5).

⁴⁹ As Williams notes, even in societies where infanticide is practised, the killing of infants, due to a lack of food or whatever, is not typically regarded as the killing of a different class of beings or of ‘non-persons’. It might be understood simply as the necessary killing of certain members of the community whose needs threaten the safety of others members.

⁵⁰ Attempts to define and stipulate different kinds of relationships according to social role might be considered an exception. I discuss this in the next chapter. Suffice to say it is doubtful whether such social definitions capture *personal* relationships.

7. Conclusion

I started by noting the conflict between attempts to conceptualise ethical living, one emphasizing flourishing and friendship, the other a commitment to a single, precise and public account of moral justification. We examined the historical evolution of normative assessments of friendship, through its changing relation with justice. We then considered a contemporary form of this debate, which pits friendship against modern moral theory, and its account of justification based on a universal constituency, taken as the foundation of ethical living. Several arguments were considered as to why such moral theory is incompatible with friendship, and must thus be rejected. However, these arguments failed to return friendship to the centre of ethical living. They failed to demonstrate a clear conflict. They rely on conceptions of friendship that are overly narrow and so question-begging.

But perhaps the matter is not yet settled. Perhaps the pro-friendship camp's attempts to precisely define friendship were misguided. Perhaps the most effective way to restore the direct link between ethical conduct and friendship, now understood broadly as something like *philia*, is to embrace its definition-defying vagueness and explore the implications of this for a conception of ethical life. We develop this idea in the next chapter.

Chapter II. From Moral Theory to Ethical Vision: how the vagueness of friendship bedevils moral theory, and how personal relationships inform an ethical vision

1. Introduction

In the last chapter I discussed claims of a conflict between moral theory and friendship, and that moral theory should therefore be rejected because it prevented genuine friendship. These arguments were, I argued, unsuccessful. Friendship consists of diverse practices sharing a family resemblance, and this renders unconvincing any attempt to generate such a conflict by isolating necessary features of friendship.

As things stand, moral theory remains a putatively authoritative account of ethical conduct and there is a neat fit between it and friendship.⁵¹ Acts done for friendship are typically endorsed or ‘justified’ by moral theory, while apparent cases of conflict turn out to be acts unworthy of any genuine friendship. Notably, on this account, friendship lacks any independent ethical significance and the realm of the ethical is demarcated by moral theory.⁵²

However, the ‘fit’ between friendship and moral theory is less neat and more problematic than this picture acknowledges. Although the previous ‘pro-friendship’ arguments failed, they convey an important intuitive concern: friendship and its related practices are made conditional on something to which they should not be subservient: a moral judgment of an abstract and general kind. On this model, a judgment that relates personal experiences to very general states of affairs, and structured around a clear stipulation of moral justification that endorses or rejects actions, is morally basic.

⁵¹ One example of this view is Marcia Baron’s discussion of impartiality, understood as a theoretical principle, and its relation to the partiality constitutive of friendship. Baron writes, “To some extent the debate between partialists and impartialists is based on confusions and misunderstandings... There is far less, and far less deep, disagreement between partialists and impartialists than is often supposed” (p. 857, 1991). Baron believes that the moral principles chosen from an impartial standpoint will endorse the partialist commitments of personal relationships.

⁵² It is easy to see why such a clear distinction is often made. Friendship is understood as particularistic, a sphere of limited concern and goodwill, and is also partly constituted by transient and unpredictable affective experiences.

Understood in this way, there is a problem in articulating the connection between moral theory and friendship. It is best expressed not through claims of direct conflict but through the idea of incongruent or orthogonal relation between the two.⁵³

Such incongruence refers to two incongruent conceptions of ethical living, one based on the kind of moral theory described in chapter I, the other derived from the practices and experiences of friendship and personal relationships.⁵⁴ Each provides a distinct way of structuring an ethical life.⁵⁵ Each represents a stable and useful social practice (or practices), crucial to large swathes of civilized life and often free from mutual conflict. But, like tectonic plates, the points at which they come into contact cause friction and tremors in our practical thinking which, contra the optimistic claims of moral theory, evade theoretical commensurability and conceptual unity. Although each serves as the foundation for a conception of ethical living, they are not easily compared. The practices of friendship can be difficult to relate to the demands of moral theory.⁵⁶ Furthermore, friendship and personal relationships can themselves be foundational to an understanding of ethical conduct. I take up this task in the final section, and the following chapter.

In this chapter, I develop the idea of friendship's independence from moral theory, by focusing on one limited form of incongruence: two different approaches to ethical justification. I argue that the practices and experiences of friendship are incongruent, not easily reconciled, with the conception of moral justification integral to moral theory.

Before proceeding, a few clarifications will be helpful. In the following discussion, I will use the terms 'friendship' and 'personal relationship' interchangeably.

⁵³ The simplest way to explain incongruence is to think of two incongruent shapes. Whether the relationship of personal relationships and moral theory is like that of a left and right glove or two halves of a tally that can be joined in a unified manner, or whether the two phenomena are incapable of any orderly union, as with a parallelogram and a circle, is beyond the present inquiry.

⁵⁴ Whether 'friendship' gives rise to a single conception of ethical living, or whether its diverse practices can give rise to different conceptions, is a difficult question. In the next chapter I focus on one possible conception based on Confucian thought.

⁵⁵ The suggestion that there are different conceptions of ethical living does not imply that there is a single best conception, which might be revealed by some form of inter-theoretic comparison. It might be that the fullest or most 'ethical' life draws on different conceptions of ethical living in different contexts; what matters here is that they can be developed independently of each other, without one obviously being subservient to another.

⁵⁶ Arguing in this way does not require conclusively proving the inadequacy or the implausibility of moral theory; its merits need be assessed only as it is directly relevant to friendship and makes demands on it. However, in section 4 below I suggest problems with the test for right action that moral theory proposes.

Such an equation might appear question-begging since, for example, someone might identify a personal relationship that is not a friendship. Certainly, there will be some problematic or borderline cases in this area. However, with regard to the issue of justification, I believe that personal relationships and friendship share the relevant features (discussed below). Further, as already noted in chapter I, ‘friendship’ refers to a cluster of features linked by family resemblance; it thus often transcends many taxonomic distinctions, featuring in personal relationships that are often formally differentiated. These include parent-child relationships, those between lovers, mentor and student, and even relationships primarily identified by more structured roles, such as doctor and patient. This capacious quality of friendship echoes Aristotle’s use of *philia* to describe such a relationship; I will thus call a person whose conduct is orientated around such a personal relationship a *phialial subject*.⁵⁷ I describe such a subject in more detail below. To make clearer the idea of incongruence, I contrast the *phialial subject* with the *moral subject*. ‘Moral subject’ here has a specific meaning: its actions are determined by the kind of moral theory presented in chapter I, which relies on a test for rightness.

With regard to moral theory, treating different moral theories as a single approach to morality – as ‘moral theory’ – might be thought too simplistic, failing to represent the nuances of the different theories. While acknowledging this danger, I believe working with such a heuristic is defensible for several reasons. Most importantly, the purpose of using it is not to present an over-simplified account in order to then dismiss such theory as mistaken or fundamentally flawed. Conceptions of justification of this type have some role to play in a full account of ethical living. My aim is only to highlight tensions between some necessary features of moral theory and the conduct of personal relationships. Second, within contemporary ethical discourse some already identify a set of moral theories as being importantly alike, with a common origin in the European Enlightenment.⁵⁸ I follow this approach in suggesting that a cluster of contemporary

⁵⁷ ‘*Phialial subject*’ is not intended to highlight a novel metaphysical entity, only an empirical phenomenon. It underlines the extent to which many peoples’ lives are embedded in and structured by personal relationships, where these structure the person’s values and sensibility - what strikes her as important, as problematic, and so on.

⁵⁸ This is not to say that earlier thinkers did not offer some version of, or elements of these theories; rather, the fullest and socially and politically influential articulation of them is identified with Enlightenment thinkers of the ‘Enlightenment Project’. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, Chapters 4-6) and Bernard Williams (1985, chapter 10 and *passim*) both identify a particular conception of moral conduct with the

moral theories – whatever their differences may be – share a common approach to conceptualising justification. Finally, treating moral theories in schematic outline in order to contrast them with alternative and novel accounts of ethical conduct, thereby promoting discussion of the latter, is a method common to recent ethical debate.⁵⁹

1.2. Incongruence between moral theory and personal relationships

Let us start with an example of the incongruence or misfit between moral theory and personal relationships, taken from James Rachels (1991). Rachels considers the relationship between what is owed to family and friends and what is owed to distant others, in the context of charitable giving. Consider the question of whether a mother should buy a computer for her child, or donate the money to charity. Rachels, guided by consequentialist ideals, judges that buying a computer for one's child in the context of global consequences to be unjustified.⁶⁰ To act in a morally justified way is to give the money in question to charitable causes.

But this neat presentation of the relationship between moral theory and conduct, with its implication of a clear practical conclusion arrived at by a moral subject, leads to a problem. It is a reasonable empirical observation that in situations such as this one, many parents do not act as a moral subject. They do not donate the money to charity, but spend it on their child; further, they do not see themselves as acting unethically.

This example is overly simplified but it does suggest one important insight: *people don't act as moral subjects in the context of personal relationships*. They do not accord with the demands of moral theory. There is a disparity between the standard of justification governing the moral subject and the actions of one whose life is structured

Enlightenment. Further, some advocates of such theories also acknowledge common conceptions of the moral in the different theories. Marcia Baron (1991), for example, stresses the role of impartiality in both consequentialism and Kantian theories.

⁵⁹ Lawrence Blum (1980), for example, outlines what he describes as a broadly Kantian position, in order to show how approaching moral conduct in this way overlooks the importance of friendship and caring. Similarly, 'feminist' writers (Annette Baier 1995, Seyla Benhabib 1992) have sketched the conceptual or theoretical foundations of Rawlsian social and political thought in order to highlight how alternative foundations of society – those lying in the family, and training in trust – are rendered invisible by Rawlsian social assumptions.

⁶⁰ Rachels writes, 'In the United States, children of affluent families often have TV sets, stereos and now computers, all laid out in their rooms. Few people seem to think there is anything wrong with this – parents who are unable to provide their children with such luxuries nevertheless aspire to do so' (p.59). But, on Rachels' view, 'You may provide the necessities to your own children first, but you are not justified in providing them with luxuries while other children lack necessities' (p60).

around personal relationships, with all of its implicit interpersonal connections and related goods. This disparity calls for some explanation.

One explanation is that most people, regrettably, usually fail to act ethically. They typically fail to make justified moral judgments and so to act as a 'moral subject', such judgements being equated with acting ethically. Rachels himself, along with thinkers such as Christine Korsgaard (1996),⁶¹ thinks this way: morality tells a person what to do *if* she was fully rational or fully sensitive to the demands of morality; that is, if she was somehow in a finer state than she usually is, while lamenting the many things that often prevent her from being so.

A problem with this explanation of the failure to act in a morally justified way, however, is that subjects such as the mother described above are usually regarded as living ethically in various ways (not least, in caring for their children); indeed, they might even be described as leading good lives (depending on other aspects of their lives). Nor are they typically regarded as being rationally defective. So it is at least puzzling why they should suddenly be regarded as acting unethically in the above case. It is difficult to pinpoint where this failure lies, except as a failure to meet the demands of moral theory. But an account of ethical conduct that differs too much from what many people take to be ethical conduct might be a bad model, a bad theory. Pursuing this line makes us more likely to give up on the justificatory standard integral to moral theory than conclude most people are ethically deficient.

An alternative response is to disagree with Rachels' own conclusion, and insist that favouring one's nearest and dearest is morally justified, *according to the standard of justification integral to moral theory*. Several moral theorists argue in this way.⁶² This strategy also leads to problems, however. In the case of consequentialism, for example, the same basic standard of justification leads to contradictory judgements among

⁶¹ Korsgaard writes of the sense of obligation to act morally that it, 'only emerges from a course of reflection, a course which may never be undertaken, or may only be partially carried out...' (1996, p256); whether or not one acts morally 'depends on how much of the light of reflection is on' (p.257).

⁶²For example, consequentialists such as Frank Jackson (1991) and Philip Pettit (1997) argue that acting for one's nearest and dearest promotes the best overall state of affairs, thereby defending both their account of a fundamental moral justification as well as its fit with everyday life. Kantian moral theorists also adopt this strategy; see Baron (1991) for an account of how the impartial standpoint justifies principles that approve of partiality within relationships.

contemporary consequentialists about what conduct is justified: some claim that it is permissible to spend one's money on one's child, others suggest that it is unjustified.⁶³

Admittedly, two people can want the same end (e.g., what's best for one's country) while disagreeing about how to achieve that. But the disagreement is more serious for consequentialists because they understand moral judgement to be guided by the empirical measurement of objective value in the world. The presence of two widely differing judgements requires explanation, about why some people are misidentifying objective value. But it is not clear how such discrepancy in reading objective values in states of affairs can be explained. Failure to resolve this disagreement, however, means that in tough cases such as those involving personal relationships, any moral theory that relies on appeals to generic and objective conceptions of value might fail to provide practical guidance; but the promise of such guidance was an important reason for endorsing a conception of ethical conduct in which moral theory is fundamental. Moral theory was originally conceived of as a corrective of existing or traditional practices, and as guidance in novel or difficult cases, but this uncertainty about what an abstract standard of justification endorses in concrete situations can result in the opposite effect. Namely, moral theory might sometimes be implicated in a rationalization of the practices that it was intended to critically appraise.⁶⁴

Such problems do not conclusively invalidate these two explanations of the disparity between the justificatory standard of moral theory and the conduct of personal relationships. But they at least make plausible the exploration of a third option, which I will explore here. Namely, while people can and sometimes do act as moral subjects, they frequently don't in personal relationships. To explain why this is so, I will approach this apparent failure to act in a morally justified way from the standpoint of the filial subject, and how a person embedded in relationships approaches action. This will make clearer the incongruence between friendship and moral theory's ideal of justification.

The argument is divided into the following sections. In section 2, I consider the difficulties of the filial subject in meeting the justificatory standards integral to moral theory. This is due to difficulty in articulating the features of one's personal relationships,

⁶³ The later position is taken by consequentialists such as Peter Singer (1991)

⁶⁴ I return to problems with this way of defending moral theory below, in section 5.

what I will call their vagueness. In section 3, I explore why the filial subject is *wary* about applying such standards, due to the risk of harming personal attachments. In section 4, I consider objections and replies that indicate problems with moral theory's approach to ethical justification. Finally, in section 5, I examine how personal relationships yield their own conception of ethical justification. The filial subject can live ethically without according with the prescriptions of moral theory. Establishing the 'independence' of the filial subject from moral theory in the area of justification is the first step towards an alternative conception of ethical living, based on personal relationships.

2. The vagueness of friendship impedes the practice of justification according to moral theory.

2.1 The difficulties of the filial subject in acting as a moral subject.

In this section, I will argue that it is difficult for the filial subject to remain committed to personal attachments while according with the practices of justification idealized by moral theory: the two ways of organizing conduct are incongruent or incommensurable. This incommensurability is due, I argue, to the *vagueness* of friendship – the difficulty of publicly articulating the properties and qualities of one's relationships in a way amenable to moral theory. To make this argument clearer, more must first be said about two important elements: a 'filial subject' and the kinds of justified moral judgements demanded by moral theory.

By 'filial subject' I mean a person who takes the cultivation and maintenance of personal relationships to be basic to determining his or her actions.⁶⁵ This subject is concerned primarily with personal attachments, and only derivatively with types of action.⁶⁶ Such 'concern' might sometimes be visceral and psychological, though it need

⁶⁵ Here, 'personal relationships' refer to the multiple features that constitute personal relationships. These include practical elements such as acting for the sake of another and helping another attain their desired ends; a set of affective experiences such as goodwill, liking, care, joy, admiration; a set of dispositions such as a sensitivity to esteemed others' opinions of oneself and loyalty; and daily interaction and shared activity.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Blum, in his discussion of friendship, describes this salient sense of value that relationships have for a person as 'personal importance': 'They are part of what in our lives is valued by us.' (1980, p. 43).

not be; it merely indicates how personal bonds in some sense guide action and shape dispositions.⁶⁷

Such a subject thus contrasts with the moral subject depicted in moral theory, whose conduct is ultimately determined by how a proposed action relates to the demand of moral theory.⁶⁸ This might be described as a concern with *justified moral judgement*. A moral subject is sensitive to the demand for a deliberative judgement about whether a possible action accords with a certain standard of justification, which is provided by moral theory. This justificatory practice might be further broken down into three phases.

The justification of action (including those done for the sake of a relationship) first requires an adequate describing and contextualizing of the action to be performed; this means articulating the relevant considerations or factors that lead to the action. In the case of a personal relationship, this means describing as fully as possible what that relationship consists in, so that actions affecting a particular person can be adequately contextualized and judged.

Second, this description must be public in nature; it must be a description that can serve as an explanation available to anyone. It must appear in an impersonal description of the situation. This allows the action and the context to be judged from what is often called the ‘moral point of view’. This introduces the demand for a certain generality in the description (of one’s relationships, etc) and also for relevance: a description suitable for a moral justification must somehow distinguish between what is relevant to such a description and what is irrelevant (Such a division might, of course, be quite alien to how the filial subject describes the situation).

Third, this description of the context for the action and the action itself are assessed according to a standard of justification that is provided by moral theory (this

⁶⁷ How relationships influence on conduct can be illustrated in several ways. For example, there is a class of acts whose distinctive feature is that they are done for the sake of a personal bond or relationship itself (and not for the sake of the other person, or for personal good or benefit). As Michael Stocker notes, ‘If I act for the sake of friendship – to take one case for all – then my aim in acting is to get, sustain, strengthen the friendship, rather than to act for the sake of the friend’ (Stocker 1993, p 253). The concern to maintain personal bonds can structure everyday interactions. Suppose that one evening one’s neighbours are being a little noisy, such that there are reasonable grounds for complaint. In such situations, however, it is often the case that people hesitate to voice what they consider to be rightful protest and instead ‘put up’ with the inconvenience. Rather than consider this a failing – of nerve or reason— it could be indicative of a particular value: *getting along* with the neighbours and maintaining good relationships.

⁶⁸ This does not of course mean a constant self-conscious concern with moral theory and justification; rather the commitment to act in accord with moral theory is that subject’s deepest ethical commitment.

may take various forms, depending on the moral theory). This assessment takes the form of a judgement that is structured by a *single precise conceptual specification of justification*. This varies between moral theories, but can roughly be expressed in the form ‘An act is morally right if and only if x’, where ‘x’ refers to a concept or concepts that can structure judgement and delimit justified and unjustified actions. So, depending on the particular theory, the subject judges whether an action instantiates *consistency* (what one takes to be sufficient reason for action would be taken as such by all), or *universalisability* (whether it is conceivable or approvable that everyone performs the action), or *maximizes objective values*.⁶⁹ In our example, the mother debating whether to buy a computer for her child reflects on such issues as whether she would be happy for others to do likewise, on the practical or institutional implications of everyone acting similarly in a similar context, on the overall state of affairs that will result from the various possible actions and so on – the specific standard of justification varying according to the theory.

I will argue for the following claim about the relation of the filial subject and the moral justification provided by moral theory: it is often not possible to justify actions done for personal relationships according to the standard demanded by moral theory. This argument can be summarized in the following way.

- In order to make a justified moral judgment (relating a personal relationship to the moral point of view), the object of the judgment must first be adequately represented.
- In the case of personal relationships, these cannot be adequately represented.
- Therefore, there are grounds for believing that they cannot be the object of a justified moral judgement.

I take the first premise to be largely self-evident and will focus mainly on the second premise. That is, this problem of justification arises because it is difficult to adequately articulate what a personal relationship consists in; that is, it is difficult to assess its value and so adequately evaluate actions pertaining to them. Personal

⁶⁹ There is room for debate about how precisely these concepts should determine conduct. On the one hand, they need not be understood to determine action exactly or algorithmically as some caricatures of theoretical justification imply. But nor can they be too vague, such that applying them leaves problematic situations largely unaltered. They must structure and bring order to deliberation in such a way that certain conclusions become significantly more acceptable, while others are ruled out.

relationships are vague, difficult to describe, and particularly difficult to describe in impersonal public terms. I argue for this below. This being so, any judgement made about them guided by the abstract standard of justification integral to moral theory will be based on incomplete evidence. It will be tentative and summary in nature, failing to do ‘justice’ to the personal relationship. Thus when a subject committed to acting for personal relationships attempts to make a justified moral judgement, such a judgement will likely lack motive or normative force (even though it has the appropriate form of a justified moral judgment). In practical matters involving personal relationships, it is difficult to be both a filial subject, committed to relationships, and a moral subject, committed to the practices of moral theory. This explains why, in the earlier example, the mother acted against the demands of moral theory and for her own family.⁷⁰ We might summarise this problem as a double bind. On the one hand, valuing and being committed to personal relationships can lead to action that lacks justification according to moral theory; conversely, when conduct is determined by the generic justificatory standards of moral theory then inadequate attempts are made to represent valued relationships.

Stating things in this way focuses attention on the *difficulty* of conceptualizing and articulating personal bonds, and of accounting for the dispositions to which they give rise. But this prompts the response: are personal bonds really so difficult to articulate, so *vague*? I now consider arguments for this claim.

2.2. Arguments for the Difficulty of articulating one’s personal relationships

It is not easy to give a conclusive argument for the claim that relationships are sufficiently difficult to articulate such that this can undermine the force of moral judgements. After all, the claim is not that we cannot say anything about our relationships, only that they are often not adequately articulated, and there is an awareness that their value (and hence their motivational influence) is often not captured in attempts to describe them. Similarly, it is also difficult to argue with someone over whether their conceptions of their own relationships are reliable. Still, this claim can be defended, and I sketch three lines of argument.

⁷⁰ This does not mean, however, that filial subject does not seek to act ethically or is indifferent to the demand to justify action. I address these questions below.

i. The difficulty of describing one's own friendships

Taking friendship as an instance of a personal relationship, it is difficult to state, in the first person, why or how one is a friend with another person (the same can be said of love or romantic relationships). Several examples from literature could be given to illustrate how people find themselves in a personal relationship without a clear sense of how to describe or quantify that relationship.⁷¹ Montaigne expressed this difficulty well in his discussion of friendship when he wrote:

If you press me to tell you why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I (1991, p192).

More generally, the idea that one cannot articulate who the other person is, and so cannot articulate the personal bond has found frequent expression in popular Western culture. For example, the idea that a person possesses hidden inner depths is a legacy of the romantic movement,⁷² expressed both as adolescent angst that 'nobody understands me' and when an unexpected action by a supposedly familiar person prompts the reaction, 'I never knew they could do that', and possibly the thought that one doesn't really know that person.⁷³

This indeterminacy can be further highlighted by considering another feature of friendship and personal relationships: affection.⁷⁴ Affection typically involves coming to find another familiar or, in some sense, appealing and finding that one's emotions and dispositions to act are influenced by them. But it is difficult to state why or how one comes to feel affection for another. It might be thought to be due to time or prolonged

⁷¹ For example, Alexander Nehemas discusses this difficulty of describing and representing friendship. He compares it with the difficulty of representing friendship in painting. See his 2009 Gifford Lectures. In Buddhist literature, some of the Jataka Tales also illustrate the point that friendships seem to arise and be sustained for no particular reason (Obeyesekere 2010).

⁷² See Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) for one presentations of this idea.

⁷³ Martha Nussbaum's discussion of Virginia Wolf's novel also outlines a striking conception of a personal relationship. On this view, a successful personal relationship partly consists in recognizing the limits of one's knowledge about another, and adjusting one's conduct within the relationship to reflect this. Thus the heroine's understanding of her own marriage leads her to accept her ignorance of what her husband is thinking or feeling, and to wait patiently for the interaction to return to a form in which she does understand the other person's actions or utterances.

⁷⁴ Here I will not attempt to fix the relationship between affection and friendship, since there is no sharp distinction between them: the former can and often is a component of the latter. In addition to affection, friendship may feature more discriminating attitudes or feelings, such as liking or admiring. For a discussion of affection, see C.S. Lewis (1960); for an analysis of the affective experiences of friendship, see Elizabeth Telfer (1970).

exposure to a person. This is not a satisfactory explanation, however, since there appears to be some degree of discrimination or some form of judgement involved in its emergence. Its appearance in relationships is not inevitable. There are people for whom, despite prolonged exposure to them, we fail to develop affection, but rather find offensive, unappealing and so on.

Still, someone might object that despite the presence of some vagueness, it is still possible to give an adequate account of the personal relationships one is engaged in. Certainly, people often have a degree of *intuitive certainty* about who is a friend, who a mere acquaintance and with whom we don't get along. Such certainty does not help with the difficulty of articulating what such relationships consists in, however. To address this problem, one might attempt to describe a relationship by articulating the traits in the other that one likes or admires, or takes as definitive of that person and the relationship. These might include kindness, beauty, courage, humour and so on. However, if the identification of such general qualities was an adequate articulation of the relationship, one must then account for those with whom one is not friends but who also possess the same qualities, as well as one's friends who lack them. In addition, one will presumably also have to account for the friend's indignation at being valued not for who they are, but merely for the possession of a generic property that others similarly possess.

But the more one moves away from talking about general properties or traits, the more one either moves towards valuing the other without reference to any concrete features (as a mere human or simple soul) or towards accounting for the relationships in complex lists of particulars. Both of these strategies, however, lead back to the claim that personal relationships are difficult to adequately conceptualise. The first gives up on the attempt at description; while the second runs the risk of being a list that is incomplete.

Two other distinctions between the task of articulating a relationship and other related descriptions pertaining to personal relationships are worth noting. The first is the difference between summarizing another's character and articulating a relationship. While there is considerable overlap between these two activities, they can be separate tasks. One can know others well, be able to describe their habits and so on, and yet not have much of a personal relationship with them. Perhaps one feels largely indifferent to them, does not enjoy any great quality of interaction with them and so on. Another way in

which relationships can be articulated is by *stipulating* what a personal relationship consists in, in terms of social norms and ‘typical’ or requisite conduct. This is undoubtedly an important basis for how many relationships are conducted, including relations within the family and more professional interactions that might evolve over time into what might be called personal relationships. However, such stipulation cannot provide a full account of any single relationship, since the more one relies on such generic accounts to define a relationship, the less the relationship is a personal one.

One possible explanation why such attempts at articulation can be unsatisfactory is as follows. Arguably, the metaphysical foundation or ‘unit’ upon which a relationship arises and persists is not a trait, a character, a role or feeling, but an *interaction*. Personal bonds are based on complex personal interactions that consist of multiple particular components, including particular things done to or with another, practical needs, psychological experiences such as desire or joy and perceptual experiences. Such multiple elements mean that an interaction is distinctive and particular, not easily reduced to generic concepts or descriptions that capture only some aspects of such interactions. This would explain the difficulty of describing any particular relationship.⁷⁵

To talk of the difficulty of articulating a personal relationship is not to deny that there are times when it is necessary to make it the object of reflection and evaluate it, summing up what it ‘means’ to oneself. Deciding whether to marry someone, for example, and wanting to know whether they will be compatible, one must first have some representation of the relationship over time. Such attempts might enjoy some success. But perhaps even here there is reason to hesitate over the veracity or reliability of such assessments. One possible reason for this is the limited extent to which memory can support the articulation of a personal relationship.⁷⁶ Let us consider in more detail the relation between memory and the representation of a personal relationship.

⁷⁵ Such interactions might also be an important locus of value, of the kind that leads to the philial subject’s commitment to personal bonds. Friendship is often distinguished by a ‘felt’ quality of personal interaction. Although not all personal interactions are pleasant, in general this does seem to be an implicit goal of such interactions. As Aristotle notes in Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, no one can spend their days with someone who is not pleasant. I will return to the idea of an interaction in chapter IV.

⁷⁶ The claim that one cannot adequately assess the relationships to which one is party appears to imply, worryingly, that a person will always lack adequate grounds for ending a relationship, including those that might be thought to be unhealthy, inequitable and so on. But the inability to fully represent a relationship is compatible with terminating it. Such a decision might be prompted, for example, by a particular act that one deems unacceptable, such as an act of cruelty or infidelity, or the violation of a rule that one deems

ii. The filial subject's difficulty in remembering and advantage in forgetting

There is an obvious example of how memory cannot give an adequate articulation or representation of a relationship. This is the relationship between child and parent. Clearly, much of what a parent does for a son or daughter in the early years of life cannot feature in the son or daughter's representation of that relationship (no matter how many home videos are made). The son or daughter typically has an awareness that something or even much was done, and might as a result value the relationship and experience gratitude to the parent. But any assessment of the relationship and of such valuing can give only a tentative and summary account of this substantial part of the relationship, one that might not be all that convincing to the son or daughter.⁷⁷

Arguably, this example derives its force from the cognitive limitations of young children. But perhaps memory is also implicated in inadequate representations of relationships between mature beings. Namely, perhaps reliance on memory results in the *misrepresentation* of relationships.

One cause of misrepresentation is that the multiple interactions that constitute a personal bond are often not, or not easily, recalled at the time of moral judgement. A relationship partly consists in a distinctive history of interactions – specific things done for each other, enjoyable time spent together, shared activities and so on. Articulating a bond thus requires (among other things) the identification of these constitutive interactions. Moral judgement, however, is a single cognitive episode and it is often the case that many of these prior interactions cannot be called to mind at the time of such deliberation, and so do not figure in the articulation of the relationship. One might say the judgment *under-represents* the relationship. What is particularly important is the way in which the experience of commitment, of valuing the relationship, does not find corresponding expression in a description.

sufficiently important. Similarly, certain aspects of a person or context can also generate such a decision, as when certain individual aspirations lead a person to become less committed to a relationship without any obvious change in the relationship or even any conscious assessment of it.

⁷⁷ For contemporary debates about the grounds of filial piety – whether it represents an obligation to repay debt, whether no obligation arises since the relationship was not based on voluntary consent, and so on, see Christina Hoff Sommers (2004, pp.738-54) and Simon Keller (2007, especially chapters 5 and 6).

Another, related way in which memory might be implicated in an unsatisfactory account of a relationship might be termed *inconsistent representation*. One might represent the same relationship in different ways, leading to different assessments of its worth, by recalling different aspects of that one relationship at different times.⁷⁸ For example, one's mood, perceptual cues, or other factors can all cause variations in how a relationship is described. In extremis, serial reflective recollection can result in inconsistent accounts of what that bond consists in.

Still, it might be objected that a person can describe their relationships in *sufficient* detail. Just as absolute knowledge of future consequences is not needed for the claim that consequentialism is the authoritative account of moral justification, so absolute knowledge of one's personal relationships is not needed. Perhaps most relationships can be represented adequately such that this representation can be inserted into a justified moral judgement without the filial subject feeling dissatisfied.

Before accepting that the limitations of memory are no barrier to an adequate description of a personal relationship, however, it is worth approaching the issue from a different perspective; namely, by considering how *not-remembering* or *forgetting* can be important to a personal relationship. A brief discussion of friendship can illustrate this idea.

Friendship (and many forms of personal relationship) is thought to be based on reciprocity – the more or less equal exchange of goods or services. A friendship in which generalized reciprocity is not maintained can deteriorate into a relationship of exploitation, or of benefactor and debtor; these are generally considered incompatible with friendship. However, although reciprocity is important, to be consciously concerned with it is to treat the friendship as a relationship of economic exchange. Taking reciprocity as important to friendship thus leads to a tension: one should be concerned about reciprocity and also not concerned.

This problem is, in fact, widely discussed in anthropology with regard to the importance of gift-giving in many societies;⁷⁹ and the proposed solution to the tension is relevant here. While relationships maintain equality, which could be expressed and

⁷⁸ This assumes that this discrepancy is not due to the interactions that have occurred since the previous attempt to articulate the relationship.

⁷⁹ For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Sahlins (1972), Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Derrida (2005).

assessed in metric terms, the participants do not see the relationship in these terms. Instead, the vagueness of memory and the disposition to forget lead each to see their actions as spontaneous gifts or favours. The passage of time between interactions is typically sufficient for each friend to forget about early interactions and subjectively see their own actions as self-contained, unconnected to the ideal of reciprocity. Crucially, if either person were to reflect on past exchanges then they would implicitly be reducing their interaction to a concern with reciprocity, and so would no longer be treating the other as a friend but as one standing in a relationship of exchange.⁸⁰ As this example of reciprocity and friendship shows, the preservation of a relationship can require that people refuse to seek the objective truth of their own relationships. They must sometimes hesitate to remember and so maintain a vagueness in their relationship.

iii. A personal relationship as a complex state

The difficulties of articulating a personal relationship is also seen when their relation to conduct is understood not in terms of subjective feelings and representations but as a *state*, whose influence on conduct is analogous to that of character. Character is often understood to direct thinking and shape motivation without itself being fully available to first-person articulation or understanding.⁸¹ Similarly, personal relationships structure (or, better perhaps, are constituted by) various dispositions, practical arrangements and patterns of interaction that are not readily conceptualized at the moment of moral deliberation. Aristotle is one who endorses this idea of relationships having a more complex structure than can be captured by first-person reports or feelings. He offers an analogy between a state of character and the state of a relationship:

Just as...some people are called good in their state of character, others good in their activity, the same is true of friendship. For some people find enjoyment in each other by living together, and provide each other with good things. Others, however, are asleep or separated by distance, and so are not active in these ways, but are in the *state* that would result in friendly activities; for distance does not dissolve

⁸⁰ Bordieu puts it thus: 'The interval inserted between the gift and the counter-gift is an instrument of denial which allows a subjective truth and a quite opposite objective truth to coexist' (1990, p. 107). He also writes, 'If the system is to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges, which is made explicit in the anthropologist's model, while at the same time they must refuse to know it and above all to recognise it' (1977, p. 6).

⁸¹ This is why some, such as Marilyn Friedman, have insisted that ethical conduct has a dialogical structure; we rely on others to point out biases that we are unaware of from the first person viewpoint. See Friedman, 1993, chapter I.

the friendship, only its distance....Loving would seem to be a feeling but friendship is a *state* (1157b5-30, Irwin 1985, italics added).

The idea is that relationships exist as an underlying state that influences conduct without featuring in deliberation about conduct. This includes the possibility that how a person perceives a situation – what they deem important within it, what strikes one as sufficient reason for action and so on – is also derived from personal attachments.

Consider, for example, how a relationship *explains* a person's action without featuring in the deliberation that led to the action. For example, a person might see a colleague being harassed by hoodlums and rush to her aid. Her being a colleague is what explains the person being engaged affectively by the situation and being motivated to help, rather than steering clear of trouble. But the fact that the person is a colleague, with all of the ways in which this influences the sensitivities and directs the other person's motivations, need not and often does not feature in the thought that precedes the action.⁸² Indeed, the one who acts might be unable to say much about this state that led to the action.

Another example of how friendship directs motivations independently of conscious deliberative concerns is easily found. This can be summarised as the way in which the interests and passions of one party are sometimes transferred to the other person without any conscious discussion or reflection by the latter as to whether he or she actually values these interests.⁸³ For example, my interest in opera might, when expressed to a friend, generate a motivation in him or her to see opera, even though such an interest did not exist. What explains the influence is the relationship.

The point of such an example is not to deny that one can 'catch' oneself in the act and deliberate on the value of this new motivation. Rather, assuming that there are multiple occasions when conduct is constantly redirected in this way, it raises the possibility that episodes of such influencing might be too numerous for deliberation to

⁸² This example is taken from Stocker (1993, p 251). For a discussion of how individual character and conceptions of eudaimonia can influence what strikes one as compelling reasons for acting in certain ways, see Wiggins (1978, pp. 251-277) and Williams (1985).

⁸³ For an account of this 'mutual influencing' and transferal of interest as the distinguishing mark of friendship, see Cocking and Kennett (1998).

cope with. At the very least, such dynamic and mutual influencing suggests that the ideal of deliberative judgment needs supplementing.⁸⁴

2.3 Summary

In this section, I offered three arguments for the claim that friendship is vague or difficult to articulate. Such difficulties in representation make it difficult for the philial subject to act as a moral subject, i.e., to make justified moral judgements of the kind prescribed by moral theory. Such judgments require an adequate representation of the relevant considerations, including personal bonds. But since personal bonds typically lack fixed propositional representation, they are difficult to incorporate into such formal reasoning processes.

This argument suggests caution about treating as an ethical ideal a complex judgment that supposedly encompass all relevant factors (moral theory). When this ideal is applied to personal relationships, then one who starts from the valuing of personal relationships (the philial subject) is left unable to account for or justify this value; at the same time, appreciation of a possible under- or mis-representation of one's relationships is likely to undermine the authority or motivating force of any such justified moral judgements.

These arguments suggest that the philial subject *struggles* to abide by the standard of justification that guides the moral subject. But in the next section, I will explore how the account of justification presented by moral theory can, from the philial subject's point of view, *threaten to undermine* personal relationships. For the philial subject, making such judgements is thus associated with a degree of *risk*.

⁸⁴ Defenders of moral theory are keen to accommodate non-deliberative but deliberate actions, insisting that what is done accords with some general moral norm that applies to the situation. But such arguments often work best in familiar and fixed social contexts, where a generic action can more readily be endorsed regardless of first-person reflection. A spontaneous compassionate response towards a sick or needy person, for example, is endorsed by claiming it accords with the moral norm to help the sick. But in the case of personal relationships, it is not clear that the acts or motivations adopted in such a non-deliberative manner can be explained in terms a familiar and generic social context and thus endorsed by generic moral norms. Such acts often arise in more particular or atypical situations, where it is not clear what action would accord with an implicit moral norm. This accentuates the need for reflection, while the sheer frequency of such spontaneous responses obstructs reflection. I return to the role of spontaneous response in personal relationships in section 4.

3. The risk of moral judgements harming personal relationships

I suggested in the previous section that the authority and motivational force of moral judgements could be undermined by the features of personal relationships, since the latter could not be adequately represented in the judgement. In fact, moral deliberation *can* give rise to one type of motivating certainty. However, it is one that the filial subject has reason to be suspicious of and so, by extension, hesitate to initiate justified moral judgements. Here I will explore how the formal features of moral judgement generate a form of motivating certainty or conviction, but which might be resisted by a filial subject for three reasons. First, since such motivation or conviction originates in formal features of judgement that are insensitive to the features of personal bonds, this can lead to conduct threatening to the latter. Second, the disposition to make conclusive formal *judgements* curtails imaginative reflection about possible action, and imagination is a key method by which the filial subject maintains personal bonds. Third, conviction or confidence are partly constitutive of a personal relationship, determining how people treat each other in personal relationships; but the striving for intellectual certainty in reflective moral judgement, grounded in an explicit moral standard, can undermine these. I consider these three in order.

3.1 The formal features of moral judgment generate motivational dispositions

It is widely accepted in contemporary ethical debate that when a person makes a moral judgement this affects their motivations; they become more inclined to act as the judgement suggests. Deciding that euthanasia is wrong motivates one to act in accord with that conclusion.⁸⁵ Here I explore just one possible source of such motivation: justified moral judgements. When moral theory structures judgement, then the formal

⁸⁵ Such a position can be traced back to Aristotle's practical syllogism and the idea that the conclusion of such a syllogism is an action, or at least the intention to act. For a summary of this position, which is sometimes labelled as 'motivational internalism' (and opposed to 'motivational externalism'), see Michael Smith (1994). Of course, it is true that even an intuitive or instinctive evaluative response can be considered a judgement and gives rise to a motivating disposition, as when a person is disgusted or repulsed by someone's cruel treatment of another and becomes inclined to avoid or disassociate from them. But here I am interested only in motivating judgements that are structured by (moral) concepts, such as 'fairness' or 'right'.

features of this kind of judgement can themselves give rise to a form of practical motivation. Let's call it intellectual certainty. Importantly, this intellectual certainty arises independently of the motivations generated by considering particular features of a situation (including personal relationships).

The 'formal' features of practical judgement that generate certainty include the awareness that the agent has exercised her own intellectual powers to achieve an ordering or categorizing of the situation before her, one that did not exist before the judgement. The ability to formulate a reflective practical question and come to a deliberative conclusion about it can itself generate a motive force to act, regardless of the particulars of the case. For example, consider someone who grasps the importance of how to treat the natural environment, formulates this as a reflective practical question that calls for a decision about how to act, and is then able to arrive at a deliberative conclusion about what to do (even if she concludes only that much scaremongering is going on). This process of reasoning and awareness that it is oneself who has made such a deliberative conclusion can, by themselves, produce a kind of motivating intellectual certainty with regard to one's conclusion (independently of the actual considerations entertained).

Certainty generated in this way might be regarded as a generic feature of practical judgement, not merely moral judgment. However, this sense of certainty or conviction can be further heightened by features peculiar to moral judgement. These include the belief that a situation is problematic and requires a decisive judgement; that such judgments are necessary if right and wrong are to be distinguished and social order safeguarded; and the belief that one has judged without reference to one's own interests, or 'objectively'. What is important here is that such formal features of a judgment are logically independent of any particular situation or problem.

Something like this formal certainty can be seen in everyday social life, where it appears as a kind of moral *righteousness*.⁸⁶ The use of moral judgments that make use of moral concepts, make no obvious reference to self-interest and which result in a motivating certainty appears in contemporary public debate on various issues, such as a demand for personal responsibility and self-reliance, economic equality and so on.

⁸⁶ This is not the only way to experience righteousness. It arises even in the absence of any obvious judgement, as when one simply feels indignant about something, that it is simply wrong.

Intellectual certainty in judgement is achieved regardless of the range of particular considerations actually entertained by the judging subject, i.e., regardless whether or not all, or at least many, relevant considerations have been given due reflective weight.

Kant, although clearly committed to action guided by principles, was also aware that such certainty might be a problem. In *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*, he writes:

Among men there are but few who behave according to principles – which is extremely good, as it can so easily happen that one errs in these principles, and then the resulting disadvantage extends all the further, the more universal the principle and *the more resolute the person who has set it before himself* (Kant 1960, p.74, italics added).

Kant believed this danger of an intellectual moral certainty, disconnected from practical particulars, could be avoided through attention to modal possibility inherent in concepts and thoughts themselves – i.e., by determining whether a possible action can be universally and a priori willed as a general principle. But if one does not share Kant's assumptions about 'pure' practical rationality and the source of moral motivation in reverence for the moral law, then the danger of this misplaced certainty and 'resolution' becomes acute.

There is one further constitutive element to the motivating conviction or certainty that arises from the formal features of moral judgment. This is certainty generated when a judgment is structured around a single clear moral concept or standard, where the latter helps generate clear-cut or categorical decisions. This is well illustrated in Carol Gilligan's discussions of schoolchildren's response to Kohlberg's Heinz's dilemma – whether a man should steal a drug for his sick wife (1982, pp. 25-32) – and, specifically, in her presentation of Jake's 'male' thinking.

Confronted with the dilemma, Jake stresses the importance of judgment and can thus be understood as a moral subject of the kind outlined above.⁸⁷ He finds a basis for such judgement by identifying a (moral) concept relevant to the situation, fixing on the value of life. As Gilligan notes, 'he discerns the logical priority of life and uses that logic to justify his choice' (p.26); For Jake, since the concept 'life' is generic and impersonal, it is a reasonable foundation from which to derive a justified judgment. Fixing on a single, relevant moral concept or principle seems to 'make sense' of the situation and lead to a

⁸⁷ Gilligan quotes him, for example, as saying, 'There can only be right and wrong in judgment' (p.27).

conclusive intellectual certainty.⁸⁸ Indeed, to fail to select an appropriate moral concept to facilitate a conclusive judgement would be to fail to take action when the need for it is urgent.

Jake identifies ‘the value of life’; but this can easily be substituted for a moral concept central to a particular moral theory, such as universalisability of conduct, consistency, or utility maximization. In both cases the formal cognitive operation – judging according to a single moral concept that bestows justification on a judgement – is unchanged. It generates intellectual certainty, and so rivals consideration of relevant particulars as the dominant director of practical motivation.

What is the relevance of these formal features, and their influence on intellectual certainty, to the experiences of the philial subject? Ideally, the judging subject is able to fully represent the problematic situation to herself and gives sufficient consideration to relevant particulars. If so, then the formally-generated motivation merely augments the consideration-sensitive or reason-sensitive process and the motivations arising from it. Both direct the agent towards the same action. However, as has already been argued, in cases involving personal relationships such adequate description is difficult or unlikely: it is difficult to analytically factorise or articulate personal relationships. This being so, the act of initiating a justified moral judgment is a possible threat to personal attachments: moral judgements can lead to a motivational disposition that is insensitive to the nuances of personal relationships, and so might diminish them. A graphic example might help.

It is possible to be overly concerned with a single moral concept like fairness, while failing to appreciate the difficulty of relating judgements guided by it to the relationships that such judgements affect. Consider a group of friends eating dinner together at a restaurant. When paying the bill, one friend is particularly concerned with what is fair and is inclined to make a judgement about the situation based on this concept. So, for example, he views the meal costs in a precise and detached manner; nor does he believe himself to give special weight to his own interests. This generates a confidence in the subsequent judgment, and motivation to act on it. However, in arriving a judgement in this way, he ignores the multiple other connections between the friends. This includes

⁸⁸ The influence of such formal features on judgment might be additive, with the certainty derived from fixing on a single moral concept augmenting the certainty derived from other formal features, such as the need to respond to the urgency and gravity of the situation.

how broader, less easily articulated forms of ‘equal shares’ are preserved within the relationships over time. The certainty he arrives at is thus one that arises partly by failing to consider the rich pattern of interactions and goods that make up those relationships.⁸⁹

This example raises the possibility that similar and more serious acts of misplaced judgments arise within personal relationships. Since simply initiating such a judgement will result in some intellectual certainty, then someone embedded in personal attachments has reason to be cautious about employing such an approach to practical problems.

3.2 Moral judgement curtails the imaginative reflection that maintains personal bonds

The filial subject has a second reason to be cautious, which can be expressed as a tension between two conceptions of moral responsibility. With the first kind, making a moral judgement is the paradigm of taking responsibility; the second takes finding out more information, more relevant particular facts about a person as the most basic kind of responsibility.⁹⁰ The tension arises because the act of judgement terminates the process of finding out more about a particular person or persons. Stated another way, a moral judgement terminates practical deliberation in a way that is morally justified (according to moral theory) and thus discharges one’s moral responsibility; but in doing so it closes off the possibility of discovering more information (possibly more relevant to action) about the people affected by the judgement. This is problematic for the filial subject since the conducting of personal relationships partly consists in *being interested in* and wanting to find out more about a person, and using this information as the basis for imaginative reflection about how to treat them. Moral judgements thus threaten to interfere with how relationships are conducted, in ways troubling to the filial subject;

⁸⁹ One might go further and say that this case suggests that a disposition to initiate a moral judgement sometimes be seen as a moral failing. That is, a person might have an unfortunate trait or disposition to feel resentment and, reacting to practical cues or events, is moved to adopt what they take to be an objective stance and proceed with a moral judgement – a judgement about the rightness or wrongness of what has taken place. Here, not only is the limited data considered in reaching a deliberative conclusion objectionable; it is also the tendency to find too many things to be sufficient grounds to initiate a moral judgment. This might be an example of what Peter Strawson calls ‘moral egocentricity’ (1974, p. 15): when there is some fault with the reactive attitudes one holds towards oneself, such as guilt, shame or a sense of responsibility; to which we might add ‘righteousness’.

⁹⁰ Such conduct also implies the making of a practical judgement at some point, but the act of making a judgement is assigned a priority lower than discovering personal particulars and imaginative reflection on these.

such judgements are, after all, morally justified. To illustrate this, let us return to Gilligan's presentation of Jake and Amy's responses to the Heinz Dilemma, and discuss these in terms of moral responsibility.

The first sense of moral responsibility is exhibited by Jake, who believes a conclusive and justified practical judgment is needed, given the perceived need to act decisively to resolve a problematic situation. For Jake, fixing on the value of life as the single crucial moral concept enables a judgement to be made; it provides a justificatory foundation while generating a sparse and clear account of what features of Heinz's Dilemma are relevant and so what action to take (i.e., steal the drug).

On this approach, *some* imaginative reflection and consideration of personal particulars of those involved is clearly needed, in order to arrive at a justified moral judgement. But there are reasons to think that the reflection involved in this conception of responsibility is limited. First, the basic reflective task is structured by a single requirement: to identify an action that accords with the key justificatory standard, namely, the valuing of life. Although a justified moral judgement nominally takes into account each and every relevant particular consideration, the availability of a single justifying concept – in this case 'value of life', but this could be substituted for 'universalisable', or 'consistency' or 'maximises overall value' – enables the moral subject to make a decisive and formally justified (but premature) judgment. It is limited reflective task with a clear endpoint. Once such an action is identified and a judgement made, then one's moral responsibility is discharged. The formal nature of the justification (identifying what acts accord with a rule) means the extent and detail of such reflection is left open. There is no intrinsic obligation to explore multiple possible responses to the situation (only to make a justified moral judgement). Specifically, the extent to which personal particulars are considered is merely a secondary concern. Jake can legitimately ignore many personal particulars without blame or censure while acting responsibly. If personal relationships are negatively affected by such a practice, this would be an unfortunate but morally irrelevant side-effect. In brief, Jake responds by stressing judgement over extended reflection.

One might go further and suggest that too much reflection would actually hamper the discharge of moral responsibility. Given that a clear criterion for judgement already

exists then the imaginative entertaining of multiple diverse considerations could, in theory, obscure what might otherwise be a clear pathway to a judgement.

The second sense of responsibility sees the act of a conclusive moral judgement as merely one possible cognitive operation among several, and grants a higher priority to imaginative reflection about the particulars of those involved in a situation. This kind of responsibility is illustrated by Amy, who can be understood as a filial subject. For her, the primary task is determining whose interests are affected, and trying to find a solution that accommodates all those people. Such an approach is thus more sensitive to the maintenance of personal relationships.⁹¹ Amy does not adopt the kind of decisive and (moral) criterion based resolution of the problem, as Jake did. She does not reject practical reflection, however, but seems confident that extended consideration of personal circumstance will itself suggest courses of action acceptable to those affected. Relatedly, while the issue of ‘relevance’ or delimiting relevant and irrelevant considerations is crucial to justified moral judgements (with what counts as relevant often assumed to be clear), one committed to personal relationships finds no limit on how idiosyncrasies and particular personal circumstance can serve as a guide to conduct.

The issue, again, is not one of clear conceptual or practical conflict but of incongruence and differing approaches to conduct. Moral judgement as a moral practice can be undertaken sincerely yet without much sensitivity to imaginative deliberation and its role in maintaining relationships, and it is for this reason that the filial subject is wary of moral judgement. The more imaginative approaches to conduct often required to cultivate and preserve relationships – considering what makes another happy, how one can get them to behave better, why they hold the opinions they do – can be prematurely terminated by the initiation of a moral judgement of the kind exemplified by Jake.

Such imaginative consideration does not necessarily exclude the need for justified moral judgements. Nor need it rule out general assessment of relationships. But for the filial subject the ideal of a justified moral judgement brings a degree of risk, in that one can act morally responsibly with only a minimal interest in the particulars of other people.

⁹¹ In Gilligan’s words, Amy sees, ‘A narrative of relationships that extend over time’ (p. 28).

3.3 The intellectual certainty required in moral judgement challenges the conviction of personal relationships

For the filial subject, according with the ideal of justified moral judgments brings one further sense of risk. This arises from a possible tension between two approaches to conduct: *conviction* or *confidence* in the conducting of personal relationships, and the *intellectual certainty* generated by a justified moral judgement.⁹² The tension might be explained as follows. Moral theory, structuring justified moral judgements, generates intellectual certainty about how to act; certainty just is what a judgement generates. But independently of any such judgement, the filial subject already possesses confidence about how to act within personal relationships. Further, the certainty generated by judgements can be in tension with or even undermine such confidence. For example, in the mother and child case in 1.2 above, the mother might judge that the money should go to charity, yet also experience conviction that her child's welfare is paramount. But, as already argued, a judgement guided by moral theory, which nominally takes personal relationships into account, can fail to adequately represent such relationships. Given this problem and a standing commitment to personal relationships, the filial subject has reason to be wary of making moral judgements, and to be guided instead by the confidence internal to the relationship. What is meant here by 'conviction' or 'confidence'?

Confidence about one's conduct within personal relationships emerges over time through shared experiences and is a complex phenomenon, but at least two features can be identified. The first is confidence about how to act towards others: settled ways of interacting develop in relationships.⁹³ For example, idiosyncratic gestures and other more conventional actions come to have a rich array of meaning and practical suggestiveness within the relationship, which might not be available to those outside. One knows how to respond to the other without recourse to much or any deliberation. Second, there is a sense of conviction towards the relationship in general, and an unarticulated confidence

⁹² I am borrowing the terms 'confidence' and 'intellectual certainty' from Bernard Williams' discussion of relativism and his critique of moral theory (1985, p. 170). In his usage, Williams does not refer directly to personal relationships in this discussion but they illustrate well the distinction he has in mind and also feature in his critique of the moral theory discussed here - see especially Williams (1981, final section).

⁹³ This is not to say that such confidence is based purely on habit and regularity; for one could respond creatively to another, offer a novel action or idea, and still be confident that it is appropriate and that it will be well received (sympathetically, gratefully, humorously, playfully, etc).

about the other's attitudes towards oneself, such that the relationship itself is not frequently made the object of deliberative concern. In summary, such confidence is partly constitutive of a relationship; without it some of the goods of personal relationships are inaccessible, such as a sense of self-worth or well-being, and the joy or delight derived from shared time and activity. In so far as the demand for moral judgement threatens this confidence, then there is *prima facie* reason to hesitate in seeking such reflective justification in matters concerning personal relationships.⁹⁴

Conviction in a relationship and the judgements it engenders do not ensure ethical conduct, however; a sexist man can be confident in his treatment of his wife and that she is sufficiently happy in domestic servitude. Reflective evaluation can sometimes make clearer when such confidence leads to unreasonable harm or inequity.⁹⁵ But here, too, a tension can arise between reflective justification and its promise of intellectual certainty about a relationship and acting with confidence and spontaneity within it. For example, if a father finds himself thinking about how to respond to the scrawled picture his child presents to him, then his hesitation and subsequent response, though thoughtful and principled, might be noticed by the child and undermine confidence within the relationship. Reflection is not 'neutral' with regard to the relationship, but rather carries its own costs. Given the time and effort involved and the possible effect on confidence, it must in some sense be justified by the conclusions it reaches. This is especially so because reflection can both change the relationship and also reveal no reason to do anything differently, no reason to change the relationship. One might summarise this further tension as follows: too great a commitment to reflective justification can undermine confidence in a personal relationship. From the viewpoint of the filial subject, there can be *too much reflection*.

Something like this tension between the ideal of reflective certainty and practical conviction within relationships explains what is insightful about Bernard Williams' oft-

⁹⁴ Such confidence might be understood as an alternative kind of judgement, contrasted with the deliberative judgements idealized by moral theory. The judgement typically exercised in personal relationships is intuitive or *spontaneous*. It is not random or non-rational, however. What is judged appropriate in the context of a personal interaction typically derives from a complex set of dispositions and inarticulate cognitive processes, including emotions such as altruism, tacit recognition of needs and of helpful actions.

⁹⁵ Writers such as Claudia Card (1990) and Annette Baier (1982) have emphasised the need for this reflective step in relationships, particularly as a way to mitigate against the exploitation of women.

quoted comment: that the man saving his drowning wife in preference to a stranger and seeking to justify his action by reference to a moral principle has ‘one thought too many’ (1976, p 214).⁹⁶

As Williams suggests, one problem with the demand for a reflective justification in such a case is that the justification is added post-facto, supplying a reflective justification where none was practically relevant. Williams’ example suggests how the quest for reflective justification can have negative practical implications for a personal relationship: it can disrupt certainty by *changing interpersonal attitudes*. In the wife-saving case, the realization that an apparently spontaneous act was done out of a reflective concern with justification can undermine confidence within the relationship, and change the wife’s perception of her husband’s attitudes towards her. This in turn can lead to a wide-ranging reinterpretation of future and even past interactions between them.

This idea can be illustrated by two analogies. The first is that of skilled practice, as demonstrated by a skilled artisan or sportsman. Their technique can be disrupted by conscious reflection on what actions are being performed. For example, one of the greatest bowlers in cricketing history, Glenn McGrath, once remarked that the reason he was such a good bowler was that he never had a coach, and thus was never forced to self-consciously study his technique. Similarly, the intuitive judgements and responses that constitute confidence within personal relationships can also be viewed as a kind of skill, which can be disrupted by a concern to reflect on and justify those actions that are the outcome of such confidence. Of course, it is possible that reflection on one’s technique will improve it; what matters is the element of risk, the possibility of a worse outcome. Also, personal relationships are more complex than sports or crafts, and the danger of reflection damaging confidence without improving the relationship is thus greater. A second analogy helps make this clearer: this concerns breaches of trust or infidelity.

Here, it is not a concern with reflective justification that disrupts confidence but a particular act of infidelity. But the case of infidelity highlights how the destruction of

⁹⁶ Williams’ writes, ‘The consideration that it was his wife is certainly, for instance, an explanation that should silence comment. But something more ambitious than this is usually intended; essentially involving the idea that moral principles can legitimate his preference, yielding the conclusion that in situations of this kind it is at least all right (morally permissible) to save one’s wife...But this construction provides the agent with one thought too many; it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, and not that it was his wife and in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife’ (pp. 214-5).

confidence leads to a wide ranging reinterpretation of, or even a suspicion of, the offender. Understanding what has taken place leads the victim to realise that the other's attitude towards him or her is very different from how it was assumed to be, and this changes the perception of the relationship. Importantly, the reaction is not confined to the offending action alone. Rather, this new way of 'seeing' the other shapes how their subsequent actions are interpreted and judged. A single realisation thus affects the relationship in its entirety, at least until such time as confidence is restored. Something similar can arise whenever a fundamental question of justification is first introduced into a relationship. But while in case of infidelity the collapse of confidence is inevitable and even fitting, this is not so apparent where what threatens confidence is a 'moral' demand for reflective justification. The filial subject senses they might live quite happily without it, especially since this kind of reflection entails a willingness to transform or terminate the relationship if morality so requires.

This is not to deny that reflection on relationships is sometimes necessary, or even that a reflective moral justification might sometimes be warranted; it is thus not a conclusive argument for the incompatibility of reflective justification with personal relationships. But it does point to a slippery slope, whereby relationships can be undermined or diminished. This is why, from the perspective of the filial subject, the ideal of making justified moral judgements brings with it an element of risk – risk of losing an obvious good: confidence in one's relationships.

3.4 Conclusion: the risk of moral judgement

Building on the claim that it is difficult to articulate the foundations of one's relationships, I have examined these three reasons why the filial subject should hesitate in treating justified moral judgements as foundational to ethical conduct – the motivational influence of justified moral judgements, their curtailing of imaginative reflection and their undermining of confidence in relationships. They do not, it must be stressed, entail the rejection of the justificatory standards of moral theory; nor do they endorse a self-contained absorption in one's personal relationships.⁹⁷ What they do, I hope, is show two things. First, there is a nuanced tension between two approaches to

⁹⁷ This contrasts with the stronger conclusions made by the pro-friendship writers in chapter I.

conduct: making justified moral judgements and being guided by personal attachment. Given this, appreciating when to initiate such moral judgements does itself become a matter of skill or wisdom, rather than a response to a simple obligation or imperative. The philial subject must appreciate when reflective justification is appropriate and when it should stop or be deferred, such that the goods of personal relationships are not unduly threatened, but nor does conduct lapse into the morally dubious.

Second, contrasting an ideal form of moral judgment with a commitment to personal attachments draws attention to alternative ways of ordering conduct, deriving from personal relationships. We discussed three: the deferral of judgment in the context of a concern with personal particulars, the imaginative relating of these particulars to possible actions, and spontaneous or non-deliberative responses to beloved others. As alternatives to conduct governed by moral theory these might, as we shall see, even represent other ways of thinking about *ethical* conduct.

4. Objections and replies: problems with moral theory

4.1 Reconciling personal relationships and moral theory's method of justification

So far I have argued that the ideal of moral justification inherent in moral theories is, for one orientated towards personal relationships, a problematic ideal. The philial subject has difficulty representing its own relationship and so fairly assessing their relation to such standards of justification; it also has reasons to hesitate to treat them in this way, seeing such judgements as risky. However, two objections might be raised against this way of arguing for the incongruence of friendship and moral theory, of philial and moral subjects.

i. No difficulty in the philial subject acting as a moral subject

It might be objected that acting in accord with moral theory does not, in fact, present difficulties for one who starts from a concern to maintain personal bonds. This objection is based on a distinction between moral theory understood as a standard of

justification (a test for the rightness of actions), and moral theory as a demand for particular kind of moral deliberation, and proceeds as follows.⁹⁸

According to this distinction, moral theory can be understood as the demand to assess conduct from a moral point of view; but this entails no normative claims about how to deliberate. In particular, it does not require a particular first-person, subjective approach to conduct where one is consciously guided by a moral standard (consistency, maximizing value, etc). *If* a conscious preoccupation with ‘moral conduct’ were necessary then this might indeed conflict with the commitments of the filial subject. But it is not. All that matters from the standpoint of moral theory is that one’s conduct does, in fact, conform with its standards of justification. Further, acting as a reasonable filial subject fits neatly with this distinction. In these cases, acting morally does not require a conscious concern with justification or arriving at morally justified judgements. All that matters is that one’s conduct does, in fact, accord with the moral standard. There is thus no need to articulate a relationship reflectively as part of determining what is justified, or to risk moral judgments negatively impacting on the relationship. One can thus act both as a filial subject and in a morally justified way; there is no conflict.⁹⁹

Suppose, for example, it is morally unjustified (wrong) for a parent to hit a child. A parent can accord with this standard without ever thinking about what is morally justified. More generally, people can lead largely unreflective lives, focused on personal relationships, and still act in ways justified according to moral theory.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Clearly, not all moral theories can avail themselves of this distinction. Those that hold a particular form of intentionality or moral motivation to be foundational to ethical conduct cannot. Arguably, Kant’s original vision of action guided by a single moral motivation is one such example, though numerous commentators have offered interpretations of Kantian moral theory that can appeal to this distinction. For one such example, see Baron (1991).

⁹⁹ Several contemporary proponents of Kantian and consequentialist moral theories, representing various conceptions of moral justification, makes such arguments to prove that moral theory can account for the raw empirical data and phenomenology of personal relationships. As we saw in chapter I, Peter Railton relies on something like this distinction to defend consequentialism from the charge of over-demandingness (that it makes too many demands on ordinary life to be plausible as an account of moral justification). See also, for example, Frank Jackson (1991) and Philip Pettit (1997) for consequentialist accounts; Marcia Baron (1991) offers a neo-Kantian version of this argument.

¹⁰⁰ As Joel Kupperman notes, ‘Many of us, in most periods of life, mainly tend to carry on rather than make marked shifts in behaviour. It takes a special sort of alertness to be able to stop and think, “This is different. I must reflect on this”’ (2010, p.51).

However, this distinction between deliberation and justification can be challenged. Moral theory does, in fact, assume a reflective moral subject to a degree such that meaningful conflict between the two approaches to conduct is likely.

This line of argument is premised on the idea that moral evaluation has no logical connection with a conscious, reflective concern about what to do. Moral theories present moral justification or as the logical exercise of determining how action or conduct relates to a wider set of morally considerable beings (as, for example, what *every* person would reasonably accept, or what *any* impartial observer would do, etc). And such assessment does not need to be undertaken by the actor or agent herself; they can be made at any time, at any place and by any person. But this assumption can be challenged.

Moral theory does, in fact, presuppose something like the moral subject, a person who is consciously concerned with a particular standard of justification. Justification and deliberation are not logically separate. This reply might be summed up as the dictum: ‘There is no ought without an I’. As an ideal account of ethical conduct, moral theory must be founded on an empirical account of the human. And, as Bernard Williams (1985, p. 174) points out, it seems to be derived from a recognition of the role of obligation in human life. But obligation only makes sense in the context of a first person view of the world, as something *experienced*. Ultimately, the various species of moral theory require a subject who experiences an obligation to comply with a single narrow conception of justification, as this is conceptualised by each particular theory (e.g., acting according to rules that are generated from a moral viewpoint, the promotion of the best overall states of affairs, etc). This holds even if that subject is only occasionally called upon to deliberate in this way (while, for most of the time, acting as a subject of a different kind – such as a self-interest maximiser).¹⁰¹ Moral theories must hold that a person should in some sense feel compelled to act in accord with their practical demands, whenever he or she becomes conscious of these; he or she must also be perpetually sensitive to someone pointing out that his or her current deliberations do not conform to the relevant standard. Regardless of how often such sensitivity or subjectivity is called forth, moral theory relies

¹⁰¹ Remember also that the original claim was only that it is difficult for the filial subject to act as a moral subject, *whenever this demand arises*. The frequency of this demand is irrelevant to the argument.

on its presence otherwise it would have no practical force, and remain a theoretical model of a *possible* way of acting, but one which we have little reason for adopting.

The assumed compatibility can be challenged in another way. It fits uneasily both with the alleged purpose of moral theory, and also with conventional understandings of ‘morality’.

The value of moral theory is often understood as its ability to guide an agent in action, and not merely structure impersonal assessment of actions. For example, moral theory is understood as a device that enables individuals to assess traditional lifestyles and practices; it also provides guidance when new social situations and problems arise, or with difficult cases, where more intuitive moral judgements provide little guidance. But the more moral theory is understood simply as a standard of justification that can be separated from first-person experience, the less it can guide action. Thus, avoiding conflict with personal relationships by removing ‘moral conduct’ from the realm of conscious concern threatens to undermine the reason for treating moral theory as the foundation of ethical conduct.

Second, personal relationships do often involve the experience of practical dilemmas and a desire to do the right thing or to act in a morally justified way. This being so, then assuming that the ‘right’ or ‘justified’ is defined by moral theory gives rise to a puzzle for advocates of the justification-deliberation bifurcation. Namely, either this concern to do the right thing is structured around moral theory, in which case moral theory is not separate from deliberation; or it is not, and this concern to do right must be filled out conceptually in other ways. But it is strange to suggest that the best way to act rightly and in an (ultimately) morally justified way in such circumstances (i.e., in accord with moral theory) is to distinguish right from wrong in a way other than by reference to the standards of moral theory. This threatens to render moral theory irrelevant. For example, in the case of a dispute between extended family about how to execute the will of a deceased relative, it seems strange to suggest that one’s actions should be ordered about the thought of being a little more generous, or more caring, or being concerned for the needs of the younger members *because* doing so leads to value maximization, or accords with impartial principles. Echoing Williams’ ‘One thought too many’ insight, this begs the question of why the further justification is needed at all. Of course, there are

cases where acting without thinking about the right thing to do leads to doing the right thing, as when the father praises his child's stick drawing as a reflex-like action. But it is doubtful how far such cases can be extended to cover personal relationships in general.

ii. Insisting on the need for a single, public standard of moral justification

Even if there is some troubling incongruence or misfit between moral theory and the conducting of personal relationships, the status of moral theory as the foundation of moral justification can be defended in another way: as the only alternative to pernicious relativism. Call this the *argument from expediency*. A person must be able to give a justifying reason for action that consists in relating that action to some universal standard (that represents the set of all morally considerable things or objective values). To give up on a single public standard of justification is to accept ethical relativism - to relinquish the capacity to reasonably declare some things wrong, period – as they fail to accord with the standard. Social discourse is reduced to entrenched and incompatible claims of the kind ‘doing such-and-such is right *for me*’ or ‘*for our group*’.

Such relativism in standards has an important practical consequence, the defender of moral theory argues. It implies the danger of interminable practical conflict, as each party claims to be acting in morally justified ways (according to their standards).¹⁰² This is clearly an undesirable state of affairs. A final and authoritative arbiter of what is moral is needed to prevent such a descent into irresolvable conflict, and adopting it outweighs any difficulties in implementation. Thus, however tentative or inconclusive the filial subject's attempts at such moral justification might be, and whatever disruption is caused to personal attachments, such judgements are necessary.

This is not a convincing objection, however. Accepting that there is no single ultimate standard of justification does not entail accepting relativism. Even if there is no unified standard of justification, there can be multiple standards, covering different aspects of human life and practice, which are widely accepted by those affected and which have an objective and impersonal force (i.e., are not cases of something being ‘right for me’). As Williams points out (1985, p. 17), many defensible choices are made

¹⁰² Philip Pettit (1997), in his defence of consequentialism as the best standard for determining what counts as a right action, makes such an argument.

without reference to a single common standard; when buying a new house, aesthetic considerations are weighed against economic ones without appeal to any higher standard.¹⁰³ Similarly, recognizing that a person has done more (or given more) than is reasonably expected can serve as an ‘impersonal’ justification of that action. So, a person who devotes great time and resources to working with the local homeless community, a ‘giving’ that is beyond what others typically offer, can be regarded as acting in a morally justified way, not merely provisionally or *prima facie*, regardless of how such conduct looks from a moral viewpoint that relates individual acts to the interests of all (as moral theory ultimately demands). Admirable altruism, exceeding the typical response, is its own justification, one of several widely-recognised species of moral justification.

The defender of moral theory might reply that multiple forms of moral justification will, however, still lead to deep practical conflict, this time between distinct forms of moral justification. But this response overlooks the fact that the different justifications often apply to and are appealed to within determinate social contexts, rather than floating freely in the realm of possibility, to be applied whenever an individual deems fit. If the realm of applicability of a particular justification is limited, so will be the scope for conflict between them. But let us assume some conflict is possible, perhaps in a way analogous to conflict between obligations in ordinary life (one has duty to keep one’s promises, but also help others in need and the latter might involve breaking a promise). Much of ordinary life does indeed involve conflicting priorities and difficult choices and perhaps this is unavoidable. But a neat conceptual account of moral justification (moral theory) cannot avoid this basic social fact of conflict. More importantly, it is unclear whether it is any better placed to resolve such conflict, as it invites difficult epistemological questions of, for example, which action really does lead to the best overall outcomes. But even if it was denied that moral justification could take multiple forms, and we are returned to the choice of a single concept of justification or none, it is still not clear that a single unified concept is necessary. The explanation for this lies in the difference between theory and practice.

¹⁰³ The political realm is also like this. Conflict among political actors and groups arises partly because each is convinced their position or demands are legitimate and justified. Adversarial politics lacks an uber-standard by which to adjudicate, without this undermining or negating genuine grievances and differences.

Lack of agreement at the conceptual level over what counts as justification does not entail irresolvable, or even extensive, conflict in the realm of human practice. People can and often do resolve their differences and practical problems without need of a single conceptual framework. There are many ways in which stable agreement can be reached and conduct appropriately redirected or reformed without such deep justification. Thus, the absence of agreement over the precise nature of right action and moral justification does not, by itself, imply social intransigence and irresolvable conflict.

Another related defence of a single standard of moral justification is worth considering. Briefly, this defence understands the ethical in terms of ideals, and the ideal of impartiality in particular: practical decisions should, as far as possible, reflect the interests of all and have a clear and public justification. It is this ideal that moral theory attempts to instantiate. While it might be difficult to fully accord with the ideal of impartiality, nevertheless, we should strive for it – acting as a moral subject and not a philial subject as far as possible.

In so far as this claim goes, it seems unobjectionable. Impartiality is one ideal that should guide conduct and social institutions. But impartiality is only one ideal among others, and further argument is required to show that it should be granted some kind of foundational role in ethical living.¹⁰⁴ It is, for example, more relevant in certain contexts than others, such as the public realm or when discussing social institutions. But much of life is not lived in defined social roles, and there might be other ideals and ways of conceptualizing conduct that are better suited to these areas.

One could further argue that it is doubtful whether impartiality is best understood in such idealised terms. Arguably, it is most easily understood as applying *within* the context of concrete social practices, as a way of executing social or institutional roles without favouring one person (as in the case of teachers, legal judges, etc) or as being a fair-minded disinterested judge in non-institutional contexts, adjudicating between competing claims (as when adjudicating in a dispute between a friend and a stranger over

¹⁰⁴ There have been attempts to provide this contextualizing argument. Such arguments start from various views of human life, such as the capriciousness of human passion and desire and their unsuitability for guiding conduct, the need to buttress and strengthen weak altruistic tendencies or the inherent worth of each individual and the equal treatment this demands. All of these have been challenged in recent work; but even if accepted as confirmation of the value of impartiality, it is unclear that this establishes impartiality as the sole basis of moral justification.

some financial matter, for example). But understanding impartiality in this way does not require moral theory or a theoretical moral viewpoint that reflects the interest of all.¹⁰⁵

We have uncovered a problem with moral theory, located in the assumption that a single universal standard of justification is practically necessary. This assumption, in turn, is based on a questionable assumption about what would happen if a single public standard of justification were not made foundational to any conception of ethical living. Proponents of moral theory assume a greater need for it than actually exists in the realm of practical activity. It might be important in some areas of human conduct, linked as it is to important conceptions of agency, freedom and respect. For example, it might be needed in administrative questions of public policy and for dealing with widespread disagreement caused by technological advance. However, we have discovered limits to this conception of ethical conduct, based around limits to this conception of moral justification.

We now have grounds to consider alternative conceptions of ethical justification, which are obscured by and not entirely commensurable with the pursuit of justified moral judgements. The practices of personal relationships, I suggest, inform one such alternative conception.

5. The filial subject does not need moral theory: personal relationships as a source of justification

In sections 2 and 3, I outlined how the filial subject *struggles* to accord with moral theory's standard of justification, and also has reasons to *hesitate* to try; in this final section I explore the idea that the filial subject *need not* meet such standards. That is, how friendship and personal relationships might themselves yield an account of justification. If justification is inherent in friendship, then the filial subject can act independently of moral justification but still act ethically.

This alternative account of justification is an empirical one, lacking a clear conceptual foundation, and based on the observation of certain everyday experiences and the kinds of conduct that are widely accepted by people as 'justified' or 'reasonable'. On

¹⁰⁵ For an extended discussion of this line of argument, see Blum (1980, pp. 46-66).

this approach, justification thus inheres directly in certain kinds of practices or actions; specifically, the practices of friendship and personal relationships. This might be stated as the claim that acts done for particular friends, for the sake of friendship in general, as well as many of the practices that make up friendship possess their own *brute justificatory force* (understood as common-sense responses to certain kinds of action).

Something like this recognition of the justificatory force of friendship appeared in Neera Badhwar Kapur's (1991) arguments against consequentialism in the last chapter. She indirectly raised the question of what ethical conduct and moral justification are, and took friendship as a paradigm of ethical conduct. For Badhwar, friendship is inherently justified because it both instantiates and cultivates virtues and, also, features acts done disinterestedly for the sake of a friend. This second point in particular expresses a close connection between friendship and justification. Badhwar correctly identifies one source of justification within the conduct of personal relationships; acts done to promote the interests of a friend, done out of concern for that friend and not for some other ulterior motive, are imbued with a strong *prima facie* justification

Badhwar's account, however, alerts us to some difficulties with this approach. It claims both too little and too much. It claims too little in that it makes the virtues the source of justification. Discussing friendship in terms of the virtues creates the problem of explaining why friendship and personal relationships are important. For if friendship has value because it helps cultivate virtues, then it is the virtues that are the source of justificatory force and friendship has only instrumental value. Friendship becomes merely one arena where such virtues might be instantiated, but any practices that cultivate the same virtues are similarly justified. More can be said about the distinctive ethical properties of friendship.

Her account claims too much since, as with the account of justification integral to moral theory, it presents too narrow and specific a conception of justified action; to talk of acting for the sake of a friend as being justified simpliciter suggests that conduct is justified as long as it is done sincerely for a friend's sake. But focusing solely on a friend can lead to ethically troubling conduct, as when a person might do great harm to a third

party because they were thinking only of the friend's good.¹⁰⁶ Friendship cannot be understood as offering a single necessary and sufficient condition for justified action.

Badhwar's discussion is helpful, however, since it suggests two things about the nature of this justificatory force attached to personal relationships. First, it is more diffuse or *fragmented* than the precise conceptual specifications offered by moral theorists. It does not derive from a single feature of friendship, but from a variety of practices that modify conduct and collectively influence judgments of what is acceptable. For example, one other form of action constitutive of a personal relationship but also possessing brute justificatory force is based on a sense of personal debt to another. Explanations of action based on a desire to repay what is owed to a person are typically accepted as a *prima facie* justification. We saw this earlier in the case of filial piety, and many children's sense of gratitude to their parents and subsequent indebtedness (without a definite account of the origins of such gratitude). But such a conception of action arises in any relationship where one has benefited from another person (such as student and teacher).¹⁰⁷ Several other practices that constitute friendship or personal relationships and also carry an intuitive justificatory force could be described.

Second, this justificatory force is *defeasible*. It is not, in stark contrast to the moral theorist view of justification, a final and foundational justification. Rather, personal relationships are one set of practices that lead us to recognise certain conduct as justified, but they are not the only source. Other features of a situation can determine what actions are justified, such as action that accords with a specific norm or the fulfilment of a role; and these might sometimes be more relevant to a sense of what is justified than the practices of friendship.¹⁰⁸ But this does not suggest that acts pertaining to friendship have no justificatory power; it suggests only that justification as a social practice might be

¹⁰⁶ Badhwar would presumably reply, as part of a tradition going back to the Stoics' view of friendship, that it is the virtues that prevent friendship becoming an instrument of such harm. If one chooses to befriend the virtuous, the friendship is less likely to require harmful or immoral conduct. However, the justificatory force of personal relationships can be articulated without such reliance on the virtues. Examining in more detail the features of relationships themselves can yield an account of how these direct people towards ethical living, one that extends beyond individual character virtues. The most obvious difference is the implication that being a virtuous person is not necessary to act ethically.

¹⁰⁷ Kant seemed to recognise such situations as exerting a powerful influence over action, as he was famously concerned that a person avoid falling into the debt of another.

¹⁰⁸ When, for example, one has to mediate in a dispute between a friend and a non-friend. Here justification might be reasonably regarded as a disinterested or impartial judgement that considers both sides of the dispute.

multi-faceted and complex; it might be wrong to think it can be articulated too precisely.¹⁰⁹

Ultimately, how we are to assess this brute justificatory force inherent in actions pertaining to personal relationships, and whether it should be regarded as a form of moral justification requires a fuller appreciation of how personal relationships present a conception of ethical living. And that will require the remainder of this work. That said, it is helpful to say more about why we should think of the constellation of provisional justifications associated with personal relationships as well-founded, something more than pre-reflective common-sense in need of a corrective theory. Something can be said why relationships, and not some other feature of human life, have a role in determining what counts as a justification of action, and why such justifications can be particularly weighty and not readily superseded or trumped.

One possible strategy is to first identify certain generic justificatory practices in the social world, and then show how personal relationships instantiate these, and possibly more fully than other forms of social arrangement. For example, one important form of justification is the recognition that one's interests have been considered by another in their deliberations and are thus represented in whatever action is eventually taken. This, I think, is a much more common practice of justification than the rational ideal of a precise public criterion for determining whether an act is justified. For example, a voter expects a politician to take into account her interests when making policy; further, unable to judge to what extent this has occurred or to what extent her interests are reflected in the final policy, the politician's conduct is justified as long as she has reason to think her interests have been considered, in some form and to some extent. This issue arises whenever a complex decision is made by one person, but affects others not party to all applicable considerations. It suggests that justification shares conceptual space with trust: trust in a person contributes to finding her judgments justified. If, for example, trust recedes then

¹⁰⁹ As mentioned above justification is only one component of ethical living, and in some situations it might not be as important as rationalist accounts of justification suppose. For example, as Bernard Williams (1985) notes, perhaps one of the most important features of ethical living is what does not occur to oneself or one's friends. There are many actions that a person integrated into the social world will never think of; or in thinking of them immediately dismiss them without further thought. In such cases, questions of justification never arise, but the relevant dispositions seem crucial to ethical living.

the simple belief that one's interests have been taken into account is no longer sufficient for acceptance of the outcome; a fuller interrogation of reasons is sought.

One could argue that friendship and personal relationships also instantiate this ideal of justification, and possibly to a higher degree. A person is usually more confident that her interests have been taken into account when the one acting on them is a friend, and it is often easier to determine whether or not these interests are, in fact, reflected in the other's actions. Thus, when justification is understood to have this general structure, personal relationships constitute a particularly powerful form of it.

However, here I wish to concentrate on another approach. I suggest that certain general facts about the shape of human life and the human good make plausible the idea that personal relationships can be a locus for justification. Highlighting this fit between generic aspects of human experience and the intuitive justificatory force inherent in friendship will I believe strengthen the case for seeing the latter more as a deep-rooted form of justification and less as merely one possible source of justification among many. So what are these general features of human experience?

One such feature is familiar from Aristotle: human well-being and flourishing require that one engages in personal relationships. The justification of acting for friends thus derives from a generic account of what any worthwhile human life is like.¹¹⁰ This is certainly a powerful source of justification of acts done for friendship. Here, however, I wish to focus on another quite general feature of human life.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation of why personal relationships are the site of 'deep' justificatory forces is the following. It is the observation that *many of an individual's actions are bound up with, indeed only make sense within, the context of personal relationships*. Generally, a large proportion of most people's actions pertain to personal relationships in some way, and it is the innumerable connections between personal relationships and action that the intuitive justificatory force recognises. For example, a person's motivations to act are typically structured by their immersion in personal attachments, as are the ends they consider worthwhile. Even the preparedness to stop what one is doing and reconsider how to behave is often linked to personal ties.

¹¹⁰ Something like this account of a worthwhile life, one with a definite structure and projects, lay behind Bernard Williams' objections to moral theory in *Persons, Character and Morality* that we discussed in chapter I.

Many, perhaps the majority, of a person's decisions and actions are made from within a local social world (and not, say, the domain of all rational agents or an institutional context); and this local social world is often constructed from the experiences and feelings of personal attachments (whether positive sentiments such as liking or negative ones like animosity). These multiple ways in which the process of arriving at action is filtered through personal attachment make clear how acts done for personal relationships can possess an authoritative justificatory force.

It should also be noted that this explanation holds even though it might not be true, as a conceptual claim, that personal relationships are good for people per se, i.e., for any individual, because they contribute to their flourishing, make them happy, and so on. It does not matter that there can be people who live happily alone. This is because the justificatory force is drawn not from a conceptual claim but from an empirical generalisation; namely, for beings like us, personal relationships are usually central to determining action (either as conscious ends of action, as constraints on action or as influences on action). It is the general pervasiveness of personal relationships in matters of determining conduct that leads to their central role in justification.

Consider the following example, taken from a popular television show. The wife of a retired police officer needs a kidney transplant, but the waiting time for a donor is likely too long for her and her family is too poor to pay for one. As a former police officer, her husband knows that a sufficiently large sum of stolen money is stored in the evidence room of his former police unit's headquarters. He steals the money and buys his wife a new kidney on the black market. However, the retired officer's nephew is currently a police officer and finds out that his uncle stole the money from the police station. He thus faces a dilemma. As a police officer he has a duty to report the offender; as a nephew he wants to protect his uncle. As a result, he remains silent, failing to report the crime. When asked why he acted as he did, the nephew sincerely answers, 'Because it's my uncle'.¹¹¹

The dilemma contained in this example is a familiar one of personal attachment versus an impersonal obligation. It is clear that replies of the form 'Because it's my friend' have prima facie force. I suggest that this force is strengthened when such putative justifications are understood as references to the complex and rich intermeshing

¹¹¹ 'Because it's my friend' or 'Because it's my father' could be substituted here, situation permitting.

of personal attachments with practical action and dispositions just noted. This means, first, that the putative justification cannot be understood merely as the expression of a preference or a desire (and so rephrased as ‘Because I wanted to’), which are typically understood as poor justifications of action. Rather, answers of the form ‘Because it’s my friend’ seem to draw on the history and experiences of a relationship and see in these the basis for a justification.

Phrases like ‘Because it’s my friend’ point to two other features of the relationship between personal relationships and action that make clearer the case for associating the former with a mode of justification. These might be called the *epistemic limitation* and *the redirection of conduct*, and I will briefly outline these.

Epistemic limitation refers to the difficulty of specifying impersonal reasons for action done within personal relationships, and instead relying on a cruder and epistemically modest justificatory framework, which takes personal relationships as the basic unit of assessment. This can be explained as follows.

The reasons behind many acts pertaining to personal relationships are opaque to those who are not party to them. As assessors of the actions of others, we are thus often ‘looking in’ from outside such relationships to assess actions. Since we have little access to the concerns and shared history that shape the relationship, the reasons given for actions in these circumstances can be either obscure or strike us as unpersuasive.

But as beings familiar with personal relationships, however, we recognise by analogy both the personal importance of a relationship and the difficult of articulating the relationship to a third party. This leads to an appreciation of the limits of our own perspectives as assessors of another relationship, given that we stand outside of that relationship with its multiple shared meanings and idiosyncratic motivations. That is, we recognise the limits to our own capacity to judge such action.

Given such epistemic limits, and the possibility that attempts to judge an individual action might dissolve into multiple differing interpretations and weightings of reasons, personal relationships appear as a useful unit or basis for attributing justification, moderating the initial intuition of a lack of adequate reason. As long as we realise the type of act – that it was performed for a personal relationship – then we can attribute to it some justificatory force or ‘leeway’. Such a practice is obviously conditional on the

harmful consequences of the action being limited, but as long as this condition is satisfied, then this measure of justification inherent in recognizing a personal relationships might be sufficient for acceptance of the act, without any great appreciation of the reasons for which it was performed.

The other characteristic of personal relationships, *the redirection of conduct*, focuses on how the practices of personal relationships lead to the malleability of conduct. Personal relationships are, by themselves, an important site for the altering, reforming, abandoning and instigating of conduct. In contrast with moral theory, where conduct is directed or redirected by relating it to an ideal measure (or moral viewpoint), personal relationships influence conduct in more diverse and fragmented ways. Further, the context within which such redirecting occurs seems more local and its practical outcomes less easily described. Nevertheless, such directing and redirecting does have an outcome, albeit one that lacks the pretensions to precise articulation that we saw with moral theory. The diverse and subtle influences of personal relationships avert and resolve conflict, enabling people to get along as harmoniously as possible. This possible creation of such harmony, at a local but potentially expanding context, is further reason why the practices of personal relationships possess their own justificatory force.

This immediately suggests a new challenge: to articulate more fully the practices through which personal relationships can redirect conduct in ways that reduce conflict and contribute to individual and social good. The next chapter addresses this by describing a tradition that, I argue, was guided in its conceptions of ethical conduct by an appreciation for the justificatory force associated with personal relationships. This is the classical Confucian tradition. I turn to that tradition in the next chapter.

Here, however, two final points are worth noting. The first concerns questions of practical priority among forms of justification. Rationalist moral theories are right that a diffuse and inarticulate sense of justification, of the kind attached to personal relationships, can need correction and more precise articulation, such that abstract ideals like impartiality do matter. But they are wrong about the importance or priority they accord to such devices, and about the extent to which such conceptions can alter motivational dispositions. I suggest that, in general, we don't derive our justifications from such narrow conceptions of moral conduct; rather, we fall back on them when our

more fundamental processes of justification pertaining to personal relationships break down and we must, in problematic situations, consciously conceptualise action in ways guided by ideals such as impartiality, consistency, universalisability or an attempt to identify objective values.

Second, this explanation of personal relationships' justificatory force, one deriving from the immersion of most lives in the practical necessities and demands of relationships does not rely on a metaphysical claim about the self. Speaking of the practical importance of personal relationships does not require any comment on the nature of the self, such as whether this is social or atomic. Attributes that have been attributed to different models of self might all be called upon in the conduct of personal relationships. This means that the justificatory force inherent in personal relationships does not derive from a metaphysical claim about personal identity – that the relationship makes one the person one is, and so giving up or acting against it would make one a different person. But if this is not true, then one cannot easily justify actions for relationships by claiming one's identity is bound up with them. It is not literally true that 'I will no longer be the same person if my relationships change'.¹¹² In my view, the connection between personal relationships and conduct is more fluid than this, terminating or giving up a personal relationship can be justified without worrying about questions of deep identity. Rather, what follows raises a question in *normative* ethics about how to conceptualise and order action and explores why it would be a good idea to engage in personal relationships, but for reasons independent of the nature of the human self. These reasons, as we shall see, are that personal relationships promote a form of aesthetic flourishing (the creation of joyful events within limited local contexts) and also give rise to one form of stable social order.

6. Conclusion

¹¹² For the view that favouring personal relationships is permissible because they make one the person one is, see Fletcher (1993); for a critical response to this communitarian line of argument, see Simon Keller (2007).

In this chapter, I have tried to articulate an incongruent relationship between friendship, and personal relationships in general, and the practices of justification required by moral theory. I suggested, first, that the difficulty of articulating what one's relationships consist in (their vagueness) means that it is difficult for the filial subject to make the kinds of justified moral judgements required by moral theory; further I explored why the filial subject might hesitate in trying to accord with this narrow conception of justification, given the risk this can pose to one's personal attachments. In the last section I explored how the filial subject can act in a justified way, and thus possibly as an ethical subject, without reference to moral theory. This is possible because friendship is imbued with its own justificatory force.

Looking back to the original (failed) anti-moral theory argument from chapter I, we can now see that the problem is not that moral theory and friendship conflict; rather, it is that moral theory wrongly assumes the need for a single conception of justification and attempts to provide it, while ignoring both the experiences of friendship and how friendship itself contains a justificatory force that can oppose moral theory and is, arguably, more fundamental than it. This, I suggest, explains the unease that drives many ethicists to claim a more direct conflict between moral theory and friendship.

In the course of this chapter what has emerged is the possibility that friendship and personal relationships can themselves provide the materials for an alternative conception of ethical living. Given that a concern with justification is a necessary component of any conception of ethical living, I have attempted to show how personal relationships are the site of important justificatory forces. The task ahead is thus to explain how personal relationships furnish practical life with a conception of obligation, motivation and other important categories that collectively constitute an ethical vision. We turn to this in the next chapter.

Relating an alleged 'ethics of personal relationships' to fundamental categories of ethical living will remove the suspicion that placing personal attachment at the centre of a conception of ethical living is simply a romantic longing for wholeness and unity. What is particularly important to any such account is that it is robust – that is, it contains the conceptual and practical tools to address practical conflict, and can reorder and redirect conduct. I believe an ethics of personal relationships can do this, although it might not do

so in the way envisaged by proponents of moral theory and the detached deliberative approach to conduct that this treats as foundational to the ethical life.

There are many different ways of framing ‘morality’, and each conception differs in its account of the fundamental categories of ethical experience, such as justification, obligation and so on. Some conceptions emphasise the importance of an individual life and the excellences and goods that make such a life go well; some emphasise social situations, where what is to be done is formally or institutionally defined; some accounts of morality even focus obsessively on the complex and often technologically complex problems; others as we have seen are concerned to relate one’s actions to the widest possible group, typically by very general moral principles. But an ethics of personal relationships will focus on another ‘arena’. This is the local social world, the world that makes up a significant amount of many people’s actions and thus is integral to their flourishing. An ethics of personal relationships will thus focus on achieving a quality of interaction as an ideal, while also taking care to promote a sensitivity to the many ways in which conduct can be altered and redirected so as to avoid conflict and preserve this quality of interaction.

Paying attention to how such interaction goes will not usually determine how to treat distant strangers, nor will it solve ethical problems created by rapid social change or technological advancement, which are typically taken as the goals of ethics. But it will contribute to a quality of life and, as noted earlier, it will make a contribution of a negative kind. In the local social world, it will direct people away from open hostilities and conflict, as well as powerful feelings of enmity, which can easily disrupt and diminish a life. Just as many acts of violence take place between people who know each other, including those within the domestic realm, so many of the things that most bother people belong to a social world largely constituted by personal interaction, including animosities at work or in the home that reduce people’s quality of life. These are the ‘battlegrounds’ for an ethics of personal relationships. Let us then turn to it, by looking at a tradition that has placed personal relationships at the heart of its conception of ethical living – the early Confucians.

Chapter III. From the *Analects* to an ethics of personal relationships

1. Introduction

In chapter II, I argued that it is difficult for filial subjects to both meet the standards of justification presented by moral theory and to do justice to their relationships, due to the difficulty of articulating personal bonds. I further argued that the demand for a single abstract stipulation of justified or right action, usually taken as a defining characteristic of moral theory, rests on a mistaken assumption – that failing to fix on a standard leads to a dangerous relativism. I then explored how personal relationships possess their own justificatory force. This was the first step in arguing that the features of personal relationships give rise to an independent and distinctive conception of ethical living. In this chapter, I want to develop this alternative ethical vision further.

Developing such an account requires two things. The first is an account of how personal relationships give distinctive content to the generic categories of ethical experience mentioned earlier, such as justification, obligation, motivation, norms governing conduct, practical reasoning and so on.¹¹³ This chapter will focus on this first task. The second is an account of human experience and practical life that makes an ethics of personal relationships practically important, briefly summarised as follows.

Whatever else it involves, ethics is about directing practical activity. This is so even where the link is indirect, as in discussions of character or habit formation, since these matter in so far as they affect action. What ‘ethics’ is thus partly depends on how practical activity is understood. A conception of ethical conduct typically begins by taking some conception of human practical life as primary or ideal and building an account of ethical conduct around that. This includes foundational ideas, such as individual or collective human flourishing or a capacity for rational self-determination. It

¹¹³ I will not attempt an exhaustive account of all the generic categories of human practice that constitute any conception of ethical living, since my purpose here is limited to sketching the possibility of an ethical life constructed from the experiences and practices of personal relationships. Whether or not an exhaustive list of such generic categories is even possible, or whether the categories themselves are in some sense a human construct and open to evolution are open questions. Regardless, my approach assumes that there are some generic categories or components that constitute human ethical experience, even though the particular form and content of each might vary. This assumption is not beyond challenge, but I believe that it is at least plausible and it is worth entertaining.

is this larger framework or ‘deeper’ idea about practical life that shapes the ethical vision presented, and different conceptions of ethical conduct prioritise different aspects of human practical life. Each foregrounds certain forms of practical action while relegating others to a secondary concern. A convenient illustration is the ‘Kantian’ concern with rational duty as an expression of freedom, and the unimportance of invasive and capricious emotions and inclinations. This is closely linked to a picture of ideal action that understands human actions in terms of their possible relation to an imagined community of persons, each of whom is considered equal. The task for an ethics of personal relationships is to articulate a comparable basic framework of human action, in which the features and experience of personal relationships occupy a foundational place. I will address this in chapter IV. The two investigations together constitute a compelling conception of ethical living: this chapter merely completes one half of the job.

I want to develop these two points and how they constitute an ethical vision, through a discussion of the *Analects* of Confucius. There are several reasons for turning to this text. Firstly, its distinctive and unusual approach to practical activity – featuring ritualised conduct, immersion in music and the arts, and family life among other things – enrich how personal relationships and their relation to action are understood. It also yields novel conceptions of obligation, justification, practical reasoning and so on – i.e., an ethical vision. The text’s ethical vision can then inform current analytical debates concerning the place of personal relationships in an ethical life (a philosophical claim). Further, approaching the *Analects* as presenting an ethics of personal relationships (a textual claim) stands independently, as a contribution to contemporary studies of early Confucian thought. Specifically, it defends the early Confucians from recent claims that either the *Analects* is not an ethical text, or it has nothing new to say about ethical conduct but is merely an exotic illustration of familiar ethical theories.¹¹⁴

Discussing the *Analects* is not the only way of presenting a conception of ethical conduct constructed from personal relationships. Related projects have been undertaken by thinkers as diverse as Gabriel Marcel (2002); John McMurray (1967), and the

¹¹⁴ Benjamin Schwartz (1985) argues that the *Analects* presents an ethics of tradition bound norms, looking back to a golden era of antiquity; for a reduction of the *Analects*’ ethical vision to a familiar framework, a form of care ethics, see Chenyang Li (1994). For a discussion of alternative approaches to the *Analects*’ ethical, see my ‘The *Analects* as an Ethics of Personal Relationships’ (unpublished).

Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1996), and contemporary care ethicists.¹¹⁵ I draw on some of these thinkers in what follows. Classical Confucian ethics can be considered another resource for developing such a conception of the ethical, but a resource that has so far not been adequately developed. The point is important because, as will be demonstrated, personal relationships are crucial for an account of acting well in Confucian thought.

While I hope the following discussion is faithful to the text itself, I am more interested in the implications of its terse and aphoristic vision than what the text explicitly discloses. Accordingly, I will imaginatively extrapolate certain key insights in the text to more fully describe a conception of ethical living based around personal relationships. Such an approach will not be immune from text-based objections. Where we end up might not always be in clear accord with all parts of the text. On the other hand, however, the *Analects* does not contain a single contradiction-free ethical vision. I understand the text as the product of several generations of scholars who shared certain basic concerns and beliefs, without necessarily agreeing on all the details – and the text can sometimes reflect such tensions and evolutions in thought.

Below I explore how, in the text's ethical vision, the basic categories of ethical experience are structured by the features of personal relationships. I will consider the areas of justification, obligation, practical reasoning, virtue or ideal character, and finish with a brief note about ethical motivation. But first I briefly present evidence that the early Confucian tradition, as succinctly summarised by the *Analects*, presents an ethical vision, and one founded on the practices and conduct of personal relationships.

2. The *Analects* as an ethical text about personal relationships

The *Analects* appears to be an ethical text. By ethical, I mean that it contains extensive advice about how to act. The ethical features of the text are rich and varied. It contains abstract standards that govern conduct (the Golden or Silver Rule¹¹⁶), practical normative commands ('A son should not change his deceased father's way for three

¹¹⁵ I discuss the work of care ethicist Nel Noddings in chapter IV.

¹¹⁶ 'What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do unto others' (see *Analects* 12.2, 15.25, 5.12). There is some debate concerning the logical and practical implications of the formulation found in the *Analects* - See Yong Huang (2005) - but it is not necessary here to distinguish between a 'silver' and a 'golden' rule.

years'), as well as accounts of virtues (such as courage and wisdom), valuable emotional or affective states (joy, shame, concern) and, of course, a portrait of a wise old sage, Confucius.

Further, the *Analects* seems to contain an 'ethical vision',¹¹⁷ a more or less coherent answer to the question: How should one live?¹¹⁸ This is suggested by the frequent appearance in the text (90 times) of the character *dao* (道 path, way, teachings, doctrine), typically understood as a 'way' of ordering conduct and society.¹¹⁹ In addition, there are frequent references to an ideal or cultivated person, the *junzi* (君子). These features lead to the question: what is the ethical vision presented by the text?

In arguing that ethical conduct in Confucian thought is structured around the practices of personal relationships, a brief analysis of the modern Chinese term for 'ethics' - *lunli* (倫理)- is informative. This term does not appear in the *Analects*, but its etymology is significant. The term '*lunli*' is comprised of two characters, *lun* 倫 and *li* 理. The first character, *lun* 倫, originally referred to the sorting or grading of human relationships, often in the form of social roles.¹²⁰ The second character, *li* 理, originally meant patterning, and derived its meaning from the striations and markings naturally occurring in jade.¹²¹ This particular juxtaposition of characters suggest that as the result of innumerable and dynamic forces and influences (analogous to the forces involved in the creation of jade), people's interactions and relationships fall into a certain pattern or order, one that can defy clear theoretical description. Assuming the modern Chinese term

¹¹⁷ The phrase 'ethical vision' is not intended as a neologism; it has been used by various Western scholars in discussions of the text, including Schwartz (1985), Slingerland (2003).

¹¹⁸ Approaching the text in this way thus contrasts with alternative explanations of it, such that its purpose is to tell rulers how to govern their state. As the discussion below makes clear, several aphorisms and much content does not obviously fit within this latter framework. The idea of how to order a state does, however, fit within the broader question of how should one live.

¹¹⁹ For examples of how *dao* 道 features in the text see 1.2, 4.8, 4.9, 14.5, 7.6, 8.13 and passim.

¹²⁰ *Analects* 18.7, for example, notes that 'desiring to keep oneself untainted will bring disorder to important relationships,' (欲潔其身, 而亂大倫). This referred to the danger of putting self-interest above one's relation with and duty to the king. Similarly, the 'Qulixia' section of the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, for example, has; 'In assimilating people, this is surely (achieved) by roles and generations.' (儼人比於其倫). The *Shuowen Jiezi* glosses *lun* (倫) as *bei* (輩): generations (of people).

¹²¹ The Han lexicon the *Shuowen Jiezi* (c. 200CE) states: 'Li means polishing jade. By following the patterns of the jade, it is split and polished.' (理, 治玉也. 順玉之文而剖析之).

for ethics to be an appropriate summary or indicator of the Confucian tradition, then ‘ethics’ refers to a concern with the ordering or patterning of human relationships.¹²²

The characters used in the modern Chinese term for philosophy, *zhexue* (哲學), are also significant. Specifically, the first character *zhe* (哲) originally meant wisdom or sagaciousness. This much is unremarkable. But in early Chinese texts, wisdom referred not to knowledge of unchanging laws or virtues that promoted individual flourishing, or to an account of excellent practical reasoning per se, but to understanding other people. One of the earliest glosses on *zhe* is *zhiren* (知人) – which literally means ‘understanding people’,¹²³ better translated as ‘knowing how to act towards people’.

That personal relationships are the distinctive concern of the *Analects* is also confirmed by the other competing schools understanding of the early Confucians. For example, the Mohist criticism of the Confucian school is directed at the Confucian emphasis on personal ties suggesting that this, rather than tradition was the Confucian’s distinguishing feature. More strikingly, the Mohists arguably also took personal relationships to be a kind of meta-ethical foundation for determining action. While the Mohists criticised the Confucian defence of particular ties between people, they too offered a normative framework grounded in personal relationships. The Mohists, however, treated these as generic categories or types – the basic goods to be maximized on a utilitarian calculus.¹²⁴ This underlines the close link between personal relationships and reflective discussions of how to act in the pre-Qin intellectual world.

Within the *Analects* itself, personal relationships are the focus for much of its advice about how to live. This is most obvious in its focus on the family, but several other kinds of relationship are also addressed. These include those of ruler-minister,

¹²² The common character root shared between the *lun* (論, meaning ‘grading’ or ‘sorting’) that features in the Chinese title of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *lun* (倫) of *lunli* 倫理 also reinforce the close connections between the text, ethical conduct and personal relationships.

¹²³ The ‘Gaotaomu’ section of the *Book of history* (*Shujing*) has ‘知人則哲’: ‘One who understands others is sagacious’.

¹²⁴ For the Mohist critique of Confucian loyalty, see the demand in Mozi chapter 1 for a focus on talent over personal attachment, cautioning that even loving fathers should not care for useless sons (雖有慈父, 不愛無益之子); see also Chapter 8 (Honouring the Worthy 尚賢). See the ‘Impartial Caring’ (兼愛) chapter for examples where relationships are treated as generic types. This potentially unstable mix of valuing particular relationships while treating them as generic types leads Mencius to criticize the Mohists as identifying ‘two roots’ (二本) to conduct, where only one should be recognised. For discussion of Mencius’ criticism, see Nivison(1996).

relations among colleagues or fellow students, students and teachers, political associations, those one is in competition with and relationships with members of a community or kingdom.¹²⁵

But personal relationships do more than merely feature prominently in the texts; unlike the *Mozi* and the *Xunzi* which are abstract and monological treatises of the sort familiar to Western philosophy, personal relationships also structure the text's presentation and format.¹²⁶ The text is an account of a group of people – Confucius and his disciples – who share practical activities and engage with each other and their teacher in a spirit of learning; and the text often takes the form of a personal dialogue within that community for the sake of self-cultivation. Learning from personal association with a virtuous person structures much of the text.

One more general observation about the text is worth making, in order to make clear just how important personal relationships are to the text's account of how to live. Simply stated, the text explicitly identifies personal relationships as the most important human concern. When asked by his disciple Zilu what he would *most* like to do, Confucius answers solely within the framework of relationships, 'I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, to share relationships of trust and confidence with my friends, and to love and protect the young' (5.26).¹²⁷

¹²⁵ In such a short text, the frequency of characters that indicate discourses involving personal relationships is striking. These include: 孝 *xiao* (filial conduct), 交 *jiao* (social intercourse), 友 *you* (friend or fellow student), 親 *qin* (parent or affection), 愛 *ai* (love or care), 家 *jia* (family), 父母 *fumu* (parents), 兄弟 *xiongdi* (brothers, or older and younger brother), 朋 *peng* (friend or student of the same master), 師 *shi* (teacher or mentor), 弟子 *dizi* (disciple), 夫子 *fuzi* (master), 黨 *dang* (clique or group), 君 *jun* (authoritative person or focus of a community), 敬 *jing* (personal reverence or respect), 臣 *chen* (minister), 恕 *shu* (empathy or reciprocity), 忠 *zhong* (loyalty or commitment), 信 *xin* (trust), and 恭 *gong* (deference).

¹²⁶ It is well-known that the character used in the modern translation of 'ethics' (*lunli* 倫理), *lun* 倫, originally referred to human relationships, often in the form of social roles. *Analects* 18.7, for example, notes that 'desiring to keep oneself untainted will bring disorder to important relationships,' (欲潔其身, 而亂大倫), in reference to a reluctance to take on an official post and so become involved with a ruler. The common character root shared between the *lun* (論, meaning 'grading' or 'sorting') in the Chinese title of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *lun* (倫) of *lunli* 倫理 also reinforce the close connections between the text, ethical conduct and personal relationships. Although the connections here are speculative, they at least suggest that in order for a text to qualify as an ethical text, it must be a text that discusses personal relationships.

¹²⁷ The two previous statements of desirable lives in 5.26 are also stated in terms of personal relationships. Zilu states the ideal of sharing with friends without thought of gain or ill-will, while Yan Hui is concerned about modesty and boasting to others. The *Analects* often features passages where different disciples consecutively contribute a partially correct answer to a problem before Confucius adds an authoritative

This brief evidential summary confirms that personal relationships are central to the determination of conduct among the early Confucians. What is now needed is an account of how these diverse insights constitute a systematic ethical vision centred around personal relationships. Let us consider what the text says about the generic categories integral to any conception of ethical conduct, starting with justification.

3. Ethical justification in the *Analects*

The *Analects*' approach to justification mirrors the claims at the end of the last chapter that personal relationships themselves possess a justificatory force, albeit a defeasible one. An apt illustration of this is the infamous sheep stealing passage, 13.18. In it, the Governor of She is in conversation with Confucius. The governor explains that when a member of his village, 'Upright (*zhi* 直) Gong', stole a sheep, his son reported him to the authorities. In response, Confucius offers a different view of how to deal with wrongdoing by family members. He reportedly says that in such cases, 'A father covers (*yin* 隱) for his son and a son covers for his father. Being true (*zhi* 直) lies in this.'

This passage is about the justification of action, or which features of the world take priority when practical conflict arises – in this case, between communal laws and family commitments. On one reading, when the key term *zhi* 直 ('upright' or 'being true') is understood as upholding a standard, the passage presents two competing justificatory standards or principles, which mutually conflict, and the question is then which standard ought to be upheld. On the first view, ethical justification derives ultimately from the norms that govern a community. In the case of the Governor of She, this standard requires the father be turned over to the relevant authorities for administration of the law. This reading takes the alternative justifying standard to be acts performed for the sake of one's family. It is the principle of 'putting family first'. Read in this way, the passage has Confucius granting priority to this latter standard over the former.

Such a reading leads to a problem, however. If the passage is read as a simplistic endorsement of blind loyalty to family, then it is difficult to claim that Confucius identifies a form of ethical justification. While unsure how to assess the seriousness of

vision; and the use of this rhetorical device in 5.26 further amplifies the importance attached to personal relationships.

stealing a sheep, we can imagine more serious crimes where appeal to family loyalty alone is not accepted as a justification.

The passage is not, however, a simplistic condoning of cronyism or blind loyalty. It is a complex commentary on the nature of ethical justification, with several layers. First, the passage is better understood as a criticism of the son, 'Upright Gong'. He resorts too readily to laws and principles to determine action, taking them as adequate justification, while failing to appreciate the practical importance of personal relationships.

That the passage is a warning against the earnest but misguided resort to principle to determine action can be seen in discussions of another Confucian virtue, *xin* (信), usually translated as trustworthiness or sincerity. *Xin* often indicates the desirable personal quality of being trusted to act as expected. This includes being cautious about what one says, so one can indeed act as one says, and according with convention. But *xin* becomes a vice when a person rigidly uphold principles or conventional standards when greater attention to the situation is needed, which might also require acting against norms usually upheld. Mencius' famous story of Weisheng illustrates this failing. Weisheng made a promise to meet a woman with whom he was romantically involved below a certain bridge, and kept his promise despite dangerous flooding. The woman did not appear, however, and Weisheng drowned.¹²⁸ The limitations of *xin* and its subordinate status to contextual decision are made explicit in Mencius 4B11: 'The great person is not necessarily *xin*, because he is concerned only with appropriateness (*yi* 義)'.¹²⁹ The Confucian treatment of *xin* strongly suggests that 13.18 is an expression of Confucian caution about simple-minded appeal to standard and rigidity in conduct.¹³⁰

13.18 also suggests, echoing the previous chapter, that such rigidity undermines sensitivity to the many particular features and characteristics of the other person which might otherwise guide action. Upright Gong is oblivious to the value of the father-son bond and, in being too ready to apply a legal standard or sanction to a family member,

¹²⁸ The Robber Zhi chapter of the *Zhuangzi* explicitly connects 13.18 and the vice of *xin*: 'Upright Gong reporting his father and Weisheng allowing himself to drown (in order to keep a promise) are examples of the danger of [xin]'.

¹²⁹ *Analects* passages where *xin* is only a minor virtue or possible vice include 1.13, 13.20 and 17.8.

¹³⁰ Another example of Confucian flexibility towards principle is Mencius' apparent preparedness to lie when appropriate. For example, in 1A7 Mencius denies knowledge of war-loving former kings in order to direct attention to non-violent and benevolent rulership. See Slingerland (2002).

neglects that relationship.¹³¹ In particular, what he misses and what the passage powerfully conveys is the possibility of profound conflict between relationships and social regulation – the loss of a father punished for norm transgression versus the neglect of communal laws promoting social stability.

Furthermore, the passage tells us that under such circumstances of acute and incommensurable practical conflict acting, for the father's sake can be justified (depending on the relationship and the seriousness of the crime).¹³² A related story in Mencius 7A35 confirms this. In a hypothetical example, the sage-king Shun helps his father escape punishment for wrongdoing by carrying him away to a distant shore. Shun thus gives up the empire, preferring to care for his father. Mencius emphasises the need to help one's father despite his wrongdoing, rather than submit him to the due procedures of public justice. But the passage also conveys awareness of moral dilemmas that defy simple solutions. The right thing to do is not a simple action, commonly agreed upon, but can vary according to one's position or perspective within a problematic situation. The passage notes that Shun's minister, Gao Yao, also had *his* rightful duty to perform (prosecuting the father). Despite this, acting for the sake of a personal relationship, even in the highest matters of state, is sometimes the right thing to do for the Confucians.

Neither passage, however, should be understood as claiming that the son is justified in simply ignoring the crime. The passages do not deny wrong-doing by the father, and so do not call for a simple 'cover-up'.¹³³ The Confucian stress on filial conduct, and remonstrance (諫 *jian*)¹³⁴ as an important means of reforming conduct, make such indifference unlikely. As the 1st century Han commentator Zhao Qi points out, one of the three greatest acts of unfilial conduct is acquiescence in a parent's

¹³¹ Such over-confidence about the appropriate action to take in family matters is comparable to the Euthyphro. In the *Analects*, the message of 13.18 is repeated in, for example, the character of the disciple Zaiwo. In 17.21, he doubts that three years of mourning are needed for a family member, demonstrating a lack of comprehension of the depth and force of personal bonds.

¹³² Here again we see the kind of incommensurability between personal relationships and moral standards noted in the previous chapter. Here, however, the standard is no longer abstract and an attempt to represent a universal constituency, but is rooted in adherence to laws and norms governing a particular social group.

¹³³ Much depends here on the meaning of yin 隱 in 13.18, and whether it means only the limited and morally unimpressive action of 'covering up' and concealing or, alternatively, the stance indicated by the colloquial phrase 'I'll cover for you': a more general taking of responsibility for another person, and doing what is necessary to help her in a difficult situation. The latter can include efforts to rectify wrongdoing.

¹³⁴ See the discussion below of remonstrance below.

wrongdoing.¹³⁵ Similarly, the *Analects*' extensive discussion of appropriateness *yi* 義, which features a concern for justice, including reparative justice, suggests the passage cannot be a simple acceptance of wrong-doing.

The passage is best understood as offering not two opposing *standards* for justification (family vs. communal law), where the reader is left searching for a foundational reason to accept the latter standard over the former, but as two *approaches* to justification: justification as accordance with principle versus a contextualism that achieves justification through close attention to personal particulars. Put simply, Confucius is promoting a form of subsidiarity, whereby people are justified in attempting to resolve practical problems while preserving personal attachments, and also making use of relationships to solve the problem. In the sheep-stealing case, we can speculate that this means the son remonstrating with the father to find some way of rectifying the situation, a way that might by-pass literal compliance with the communal law but still address and 'makes right' the wrongdoing.

This alternative approach to justification becomes plausible when the passage is understood as another instance of Confucius redefining an ethical term – in this case *zhi* 直. He did this for many of the key ethical terms of his day discussed in the *Analects*. Such redefined terms include *junzi* (cultivated person 君子), *ren* (authoritative conduct 仁), *li* (ritualised conduct 禮) and *yi* (appropriateness 義).¹³⁶ Similarly, Confucius redefines the commendatory ethical term *zhi* 直. A 'true person' is no longer someone who upholds conventional norms or standards (such as the law governing sheep stealing). Within Confucius' ethical vision, *zhi* indicates immersion in the details of a situation and taking responsibility for it. In this case, this means the son taking responsibility for the

¹³⁵ See Zhao Qi's commentary on Mencius 4A26 (cited in Irene Bloom, 2011, p. 84).

¹³⁶ It is widely agreed that Confucius invests the term '*junzi*' with moral force, shifting its connotation from a prince, royalty or social position to a cultivated and exemplary person. *Ren* is similarly transformed from the virile qualities and poise of a nobleman to a moral ideal of social authority, a pillar of the community. Further, Fingarette (1971) has argued that Confucius transforms the key meaning of '*li*': from traditional rituals and court practice to a social order based on shared social norms and communal forms of life imbued with religious or spiritual significance. Analogously, and partly in response to Fingarette's perceived lack of individual discretion and judgment in the text, Hall and Ames (1987) further argued that the *Analects* use of *yi* is innovative. It no longer refers to conventional morality or fixed traditional obligations but denotes the capacity for contextual judgements of what is appropriate, given a suitable grounding in the relevant cultural codes and practices. For a criticism of Hall and Ames' interpretation, see Chad Hansen (2009, p. 257-8).

father's actions. The original graph brings out this meaning. It consisted of an eye 目 and a straight line, suggesting the idea of seeing straight or confronting the situation before one. A modern usage of *zhi* also illuminates 13.18 – that of being frank, or frankly addressing the details of the situation. Within the moral vision of the *Analects*, *zhi* becomes a reference to attentiveness and responsiveness to situations, and is thus close in meaning to *yi* (義 action appropriate to context), and *de* (德 personal excellence and its subsequent influence on other people).¹³⁷

Interpreted in this way, the passage echoes the discussion of justification presented in the last chapter. Because personal relationships are thoroughly implicated in the structuring of an individual's sensibilities and dispositions so they acquire a justificatory force (i.e., are accepted as reasonable explanations of action by others): he is justified in attempting to preserve them while also trying to reform conduct or rectify cases of wrongdoing. The justification thus comes from realisation of the innumerable ways that specific personal relationships shape and direct action, as well as benefit individuals engaged in them, often in ways that go beyond conscious and public articulation. The way to resolve or avoid practical problems is, wherever possible, to use the practices and features of personal relationships and the motivations, knowledge and skills integral to them, on account of the leverage these have on the action of those to whom one is personally attached.

To summarise, the most authoritative justificatory force for the Confucians – i.e., what satisfies people's demand for explanations of action – inheres in certain descriptions of human practices and, specifically, those that maintain personal relationships. Within this ethical vision, recognising conduct under such descriptions can end objections, though perhaps not disagreement. But the latter, more elusive achievement may not be necessary for acceptance of, and satisfaction with, an explanation of conduct.

This alternative account of justification contrasts with justification derived from judgements that relate a particular action to norms governing an extended imaginary or actual community of morally-considerable members (of the kind referenced by the Governor of She). The latter is one important conception of justification, appealed to when we think of ourselves as political actors. But is not the only one, and it is an open

¹³⁷ Notably, an alternative early graph for 德 is 惇.

question as to which conception of justification is more fundamental, if at all any ultimately is. Further, how the justificatory force that attaches to personal relationships is assessed depends upon how we assess the moral vision to which it belongs – in this case the *Analects* moral vision. This in turn depends on the other categories of ethical conduct – obligation, practical reasoning and so on – and whether these collectively constitute a convincing ethical vision. This chapter presents this broader argument.

Considering the other constitutive elements of the ethical vision raises another issue, however: how important justification itself is to ethical conduct. At least within some ethical visions, other aspects of ethical life – a sense of obligation, dispositions to judge or respond to situations with certain thoughts or feelings, etc – might be more important than the justification of action. Where tensions arise between two such ethical practices, then the justification of action might be a secondary concern. The early Confucians did not develop an account of reflective and discursive reason-sensitive justification, and this is a weakness of that vision. However, this might be because they take the self-conscious questioning of what is fair or legitimately claimed to be less important than in those ethical visions founded on an explicit standard or principle that both guides and invites a judgmental stance.

So far, I have argued that 13.18 confirms that the most important conception of justification in the *Analects* is derived from personal relationships. Next we must substantiate this conception of ethical living based on personal relationships, by examining how other formal ethical categories are similarly structured by the features of personal relationships.

4. Ethical norms of conduct as norms governing personal relationships; ethical obligation as the obligations of personal relationships

Ethical living requires the shared adoption of a set of practical social norms or standards. These distinguish right actions from wrong ones and thereby ameliorate conflict and preserve social order among a community. Further, such norms also shape a person's sense of obligation. By a 'sense of obligation', I mean a subject's experience of a demand for certain action or actions, or a sense of being bound to some or other feature

of the world, which are independent of and can be in opposition to individual desires and plans. Obligation is another constitutive component of ethical conduct.¹³⁸

In the *Analects*, personal relationships are the primary focus for such normative prescriptions. A wide variety of norms, possibly the majority of those in the text, as well as the most concrete in terms of specific actions, all focus on personal relationships. This is seen most readily in the practical prescriptions governing family life. Children are to avoid giving parents cause for concern (2.5), care for them with a genuine feeling (2.6), control their speech towards parents (4.18), limit their travels (4.19), know their parents age and refrain from changing the affairs of a deceased father (4.20). Junior members of the community - younger brothers and sons - are also given instructions on how to behave at home and in the community (1.6).

Practical norms are also applied to a wider set of relationships in the text, making clear that the ethical significance of personal relationships extends beyond the family realm and into the local social world. These include: prescriptions for how *junzi* conduct themselves – by, for example, avoiding contentious behaviour (3.7, 15.22); not unduly favouring or siding with any particular group of people (7.31, 15.22); that an official should serve his ruler personally by ‘exhausting himself’ (1.7)¹³⁹; and several discussions of how to be a friend, including being ‘critical and demanding, yet amicable’ (13.28) and ‘broadly informed’ (16.4). More generally, meeting others, getting to know them, making interpersonal comparisons and learning from them are all prescribed norms of conduct (4.17, 7.22).

It is striking that although Confucius memorably laments the decline of earlier traditions, he rarely asserts specific traditional or ritual norms in a way comparable to the

¹³⁸ A well-known and explicitly moralized conception of obligation is provided by Kant: the categorical imperative. This calls for a human agent to make his or her will conform to a particular standard, one independent of inclination or desire. But while obligation can reasonably be taken to be a necessary feature of ethical living, not all forms of obligation are equal. In some societies, when their honour is questioned, some men have felt compelled to defend it by duelling. Many people would now doubt whether this form of obligation should be considered part of ethical conduct. This is partly because of its potentially violent consequences; but some might argue that honour itself is no longer an important virtue and is thus inappropriate grounds for a sense of obligation. One could argue that being free of any such sense of compulsion seems preferable to being bound by honour in this way. Thus, while a sense of obligation might be generic to organised social experience, the form this takes is open to discussion. In what follows I will develop an account of obligation structured by personal relationships.

¹³⁹ 1.7 urges a personal commitment to one’s ruler: one who ‘in serving one’s lord, exhausts himself’ (事君, 致其身) can be considered ‘educated indeed’ (謂之學矣).

extensiveness and explicitness of norms governing personal relationship.¹⁴⁰ Admittedly, however, norms governing personal relationships are not the only norms in the text. There are also some quite specific judgments about conducting sacrifices (e.g., 2.24)¹⁴¹ and some implied criticism of ritual conduct, early in Chapter 3 for example (e.g., 3.1). Practical subjects such as fasting, warfare and illness (7.13), conditions for wealth (7.12) and education in music and the arts are also addressed by Confucius. The plurality of practical norms mentioned in the text, although limited, raises the question of whether the norms of personal relationships have any particularly privileged place in the Confucian account of ethical life. What is needed, it seems, is confirmation that the norms governing personal relationships take *priority* over other norms. In fact, we have already encountered such confirmation. It was proved by 13.18. It tells us that acts done for the sake of personal relationships, including compliance with the specific norms that govern such relationships, are to be granted priority over other standards of action.¹⁴²

The text suggests that right and wrong are distinguished, and a sense of obligation given determinate form, by norms and duties pertaining to personal relationships. However, while this is evidence that the Confucian ethical vision is one structured around personal relationships, a familiar objection looms: that the vision described thus far is not an *ethical* vision. This objection is worth detailed discussion because the Confucian discourse on personal relationships has frequently been framed as the presentation of specific normative prescriptions and duties; and the desirability or permissibility of these

¹⁴⁰ One might argue that the traditional ritual norms valued by the early Confucians were already so widely known they could be omitted from the text while retaining their normative force. Such norms might include those found in the *Zhou Li* (The Record of Rites). But it is not clear that, for the composers of the *Analecets*, there was such a defined set of practical standards, or that there were standards whose origins could be accurately traced back to the early Zhou. Much depends on one's view of the provenance of the *Zhou Li*, and whether or not the ritual norms therein were later and semi-imaginative creations, whose relation to the early dynasty and the historical Confucius is opaque. The fact that the competing philosophical schools also claimed validation from earlier history should make us suspicious. Mozi's defence of *jianai* (impartial caring), for example, claims to be a description of how sage kings such as Yu and Wen acted (See the *Jianai* chapter of the *Mozi*). Regardless, the question remains as to why the norms pertaining to personal relationships *are* included in the text. This could be taken as evidence of the early Confucians' desire to emphasise their importance, to highlight them against a background of more familiar (but possibly less important) social norms.

¹⁴¹ 2:24: 'Sacrificing to Spirits other than one's own is being obsequious'. But note that here too the vice is an inter-personal failing, that of flattery.

¹⁴² There might appear to be a conflict here with the above claim that Confucian is directing attention away from according to fixed standards. But the idea that whenever standards are to be followed they are those pertaining to personal relationships is compatible with the idea that what justifies action directed by personal relationships is more than simply accord with standards.

demands has frequently been challenged. There are, in fact, three related objections, each of which associates the *Analects* with some sort of ethical failing. Let us call these the *objection from tradition*, the *narrow obligation objection*, and the *objection from oppression*.

4.1 Are the *Analects*' normative prescriptions really ethical prescriptions?

The *objection from tradition* holds that these practical norms and social duties that shape relationships are the product of a particular historical tradition. But, the objection continues, these traditional conventions are not subject to critical scrutiny or justification in the text, so why should there be an ethical obligation to obey? ¹⁴³ Further, even if one charitably imagines such norms as suitable for that community, it is still possible to ask what relevance these tradition-bound prescriptions have today. Many norms or social duties once widely accepted have since been rejected as unethical, including many pertaining to slavery and gender discrimination. ¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the norms pertaining to personal relationships are similar to these.

A further problem for the claim that the *Analects* presents an ethical vision founded on personal relationships is that if its prescriptions are rooted in tradition, then personal relationships themselves are no longer foundational to the ethical vision. What is ethically basic are not personal relationships per se but a set of traditional norms that stipulate correct behaviour, some of which happen to focus on personal relationships *among other things*. What promised to be an alternative ethical vision reduces to one based on tradition.

The *narrow obligation objection* starts by noting that the norms and obligations in the *Analects*, structured as they are by personal relationships, apply only to a select few – to those with whom some kind of personal or biological connection exists. No obligations exist towards strangers and those beyond personal and familial ties. However, the

¹⁴³ Chad Hansen provides a clear expression of this objection: ‘Confucius, however, does not raise the debater’s metaquestion of justification...Indeed, he seems to have no cognizance of the metaquestion at all. When it is raised in his presence he pointedly avoids it...This suggests that Confucius thinks of *yi* (morality) as a convention, as mores rather than moral reasoning’ (Hansen, 2000, p.82)

¹⁴⁴ Much depends here on how tradition itself is assessed as a source of ethical conduct. Discussing how tradition might itself be regarded as ethical is beyond the present paper. Suffice to say, at least in post-Enlightenment secular moral philosophy, any conception of ethical living is expected to contain the resources to critically evaluate and possibly reform tradition, rather than simply accord with it.

objection holds, genuine ethical obligation is wide in scope, experienced as a demand to consider the interests of people beyond one's extended family. The limited scope of the Confucian prescriptions means that their practical demands are not genuine ethical obligations.¹⁴⁵ One might also say that since this particular set of prescriptions has force only within a particular group – the early Confucians – these norms and duties are closer to the demands of etiquette than morality.

Finally, there is the *objection from oppression*. This begins by understanding the obligation attached to personal relationships as obedience to individuals occupying certain 'higher' socially defined roles or positions. But since such obligations are generated simply by standing in a certain socially-defined relationship to another, they are insensitive to the concerns of the individual. Since there is no escape from the (unjustified) demands, they prevent a person from developing their own life projects. These obligations are thus oppressive.¹⁴⁶

The text can be read in ways that ground this objection. This is most obvious in discussions of filial conduct (*xiao*) and, in particular, its apparent demand for obedience to parents. The locus classicus for this categorical demand is passage 4.18:¹⁴⁷ 'In serving your parents, remonstrate with them gently; in seeing that your wishes are not being followed, continue to be respectful and do not act contrary.'¹⁴⁸

These objections have a foundation that extends beyond a few lines in the *Analects*, however. They arise when the *Analects*' discourse on personal relationships is understood as the distinctive *Confucian* doctrine of five cardinal human relationships, *wulun* 五倫 or *renlun* 人倫 (henceforth *wulun*); i.e., when the text is read as part of a larger philosophical and dynastic tradition labelled *Confucianism*. The concept of *wulun*

¹⁴⁵ Ci Jiwei, for example, suggests that the Confucian ethical community extends only as far as biological and kinship ties, but lacks the resources to extend further, and so incorporating strangers: 'Those who have absorbed the Confucian concept of human relations would be socially and ethically at sea if they were to enter into relations with strangers, where the conjunction of hierarchical-reciprocal relations and kinship ties simply does not exist' (1999, p. 334).

¹⁴⁶ Several writers have raised a version of this objection. For example, Slote (1998) describes how filial piety (*xiao* 孝) serves as an instrument of authoritarianism. Hu (1944) claims that it has been used to create and sustain loyalty to a political elite.

¹⁴⁷ Also relevant are 1.11, 2.5-2.8 and 4.19-4.21.

¹⁴⁸ A related form of this objection arises when the text is read as advocating a form of class division, where the elite rule, bureaucrats administer and a substantial peasant body knows its station and remains there.

is usually understood to indicate the identification of multiple fixed duties towards others based on particular socially-defined relationships, such as son to father or minister to ruler.¹⁴⁹ Such hierarchical relationships are nominally reciprocal and involve an obligation for the superior to respond to the interests of the subservient party. Despite this intimation of reciprocity, however, any appeal to the five cardinal relationships as a set of norms that ensure social order has been repeatedly criticised within the Chinese tradition.¹⁵⁰ How might the project of approaching ethical living through personal relationships, and the prescriptions attaching to them, be defended against the three objections?

4.2 Possible replies to the three objections

Let us assume that the *Analects* is the grounds for, and is consistent with, the doctrine of *wulun*. One could defend this account of normative prescriptions – personal relationships ordered by specific practical demands towards particular people – by pointing out certain ethically appealing features. For example, understanding ethical conduct in this way addresses a perennial concern of Western ethical theorising: how to combat egoism. A life immersed in such a social network and observant in duties to others could not readily be understood as egoistic, since it appears incompatible with the following of individual desires and inclinations without regard for the interests of others. Further, such a plethora of practical norms stipulating conduct would presumably enhance social order and minimise interpersonal conflict, and this seems a laudable aim of any ethical theory. However, this line of defence leaves unaddressed the original concern: that these multiple social norms lead to oppressive demands and obligations.

¹⁴⁹ An early and putative account of the *wulun* is provided in Mencius 3A4: ‘Between parents and children there is affection; between ruler and minister, rightness; between husband and wife, separate functions; between older and younger, proper order; and between friends, sincerity.’ On how the five relations were to be taught in schools (*xiang* 庠 and *xu* 序), and how filial and fraternal duty were to be taught, see also 1A3 and 3A3.

¹⁵⁰ For example, the relationship of friendship was sometimes presented as an ideal relationship, avoiding the perceived rigidity of the other four cardinal relationships. In the twentieth century, Tan Sitong (1963, chapter 38, pp. 127-8) seized on the friendship relationship as offering a new and liberated basis for Chinese social order. For an analogous argument in contemporary ethical debate, that friendship can replace family as an ethically basic relationship, see Marilyn Friedman (1993, especially chapters seven and eight). Among contemporary Chinese scholars, Liu Qingping (2004) has argued for the limitations of an ethics based on personal attachment.

In response, one could argue that these personal obligations are not, in fact, so oppressive. In particular, it might be argued that *wulun* emphasises remonstrance (諫 *jian*) as much as obedience to authority. Ethically-dubious *submission* to those in ‘superior’ social positions is not part of such obligations; even if compliance is ultimately required, this can be within a context of intense and sustained disputation.¹⁵¹

Some pre-Qin Confucian texts do emphasise such methods in order to reform rulers and parents. A passage in the *Books of Rites*, (*Liji* 禮記), for example, calls for ongoing remonstrance from children towards parents when the parents are believed to be acting incorrectly.¹⁵² The *Xiaojing* also supports this approach, portraying filial conduct (*xiao*) as a more nuanced virtue than mere obedience.¹⁵³ However, trying to rehabilitate the five relationships (*wulun*) by emphasising individual disagreement and disputation in equal measure to the need for obedience is not a strategy well-supported by the *Analects*, where remonstrance is not widely discussed. But even if it were, there is a further problem. Ethical conduct seems to require more than compliance with social norms, it must sometimes compel their rejection or reform. In the text, however, the final word remains compliance. Indeed, 4.18, quoted above, advises only limited resistance: ‘Do not act contrary’. The scope for remonstrance to shore up the ethical status of the norms and duties of relationships appears limited.

Another strategy for defending this vision based on personal relationships as ethical is to distinguish between the *Analects* qua *text* and the orthodox Confucian *tradition*. Perhaps personal relationships, when structured by numerous social norms and duties associated with *wulun* are ethically problematic. But, this argument runs, such

¹⁵¹ The text can thus be read as grounding ethical obligation in an intriguing but plausible moral psychology. A person can vehemently disagree with someone and with social norms and expectations, yet accord with them because of the strength of feelings directed to particular people, such as indebtedness (*en* 恩), loyalty or commitment (*zhong* 忠), love (*ai* 愛) or affection (*qin* 親). Compliance is not the result of meekness or obedience, but personal attachment. Similarly, drawing on discussions of vagueness in the previous chapter, it is also plausible that people comply not from a simple obedience but because the complexity, opacity and potential goods of interpersonal relationships make this the right thing to do.

¹⁵² ‘With regard to a son serving his parents...he remonstrates three times’ - see James Legge (1967, Vol. 1. p. 114).

¹⁵³ See for example, chapter 15. When Zengzi asks the master if obeying the commands of one’s father makes a son filial, he replies, ‘If confronted by reprehensible behaviour on his father’s part, a son has no choice but to remonstrate with his father, and if confronted by reprehensible behaviour on his ruler’s part, a minister has no choice but to remonstrate with his ruler. Hence, remonstrance is the only response to immorality. How could simply obeying the commands of one’s father be deemed filial?’ (quoted in Ames p114 2009).

extensive codification and dogma are a product of the later tradition: the initial insights of the early Confucian community were co-opted for ideological and political ends of rulers and dynasties. Later doctrine was thus not an accurate reflection of the *Analects* treatment of personal relationships.¹⁵⁴ Even if such doctrine demanded oppressive compliance with multiple specific social norms and duties, perhaps the ethical vision of the *Analects* itself does not.

There is some evidence that the vision towards which the text gestures was not the one conveyed by later ‘Confucianism’. The text does not contain any explicit pronouncement about the five relationships: the terms *wulun* and *renlun* (人倫) do not appear in the text.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, the text never mentions the husband-wife bond. In fact, as Pan Guangdan’s study shows (1947), there is no clear doctrine of *wulun* at the time of Confucius. The content of the five relationships becomes fixed only later.¹⁵⁶ This is evidence that social norms and duties based on generic social categories and roles are not the only or most important way of understanding relationships. Rather, it could be a later imposition, distorting how the text itself imagines the relation between personal attachment and conduct.¹⁵⁷

Such an argument must be placed within the constraints of the text, however. Although there is no explicit discourse on the ‘five relationships’ in the *Analects*, the text does contain materials that imply or are at least consistent with such a framework. As noted already, references to relationships such as father-son, parent-child, younger-older and ruler-minister are ubiquitous in the text, and these relationships are sometimes framed in terms of socially defined duties. The formalisation of the five cardinal relationships might be a later development, but it can legitimately be said to have roots in some of what the text says about personal relationships. It would thus be premature to draw too firm a distinction between the later tradition’s ‘objectionable’ focus on the five

¹⁵⁴ Tu Wei-Ming (1998), for example, discusses this separation.

¹⁵⁵ Although, as noted above, the phrase *dalun* (‘important relationships’ 大倫) does appear (18.7).

¹⁵⁶ During the Warring States, though texts such as the Mencius and Xunzi cite five relationships, there is no agreement on the precise make up of them. Similarly, other texts mention only one or two dyadic relationships. A final, widely accepted account of the five cardinal relationships only arrives in the Qing dynasty (Pan 1947, p. 42).

¹⁵⁷ Ambrose King, for example, asserts that the basic Confucian relationships were originally conceived of as equal, and only later legally codified as hierarchical relationships of authority and obedience, partly due to the influence of the *Xiaojing* (*The Classic of Family Reverence*). For King, this evolution also concealed the important role assigned to individual effort and self-cultivation in the *Analects* (King, 1985 pp. 57-70).

cardinal relationships and a depiction of *Analects*' ethical vision. In its crude form, then, a putative distinction between the *Analects* ethical vision and the later imperial Confucian tradition's interpretation of it is not sufficient to defend the text against the above objections (though the distinction is relevant and I will return to it below).

Perhaps at this point, and from the standpoint of contemporary Western liberal ethical thought, we should simply admit a degree of puzzlement at the early Confucian concern with social norms and prescriptions governing personal relationships. Such puzzlement arises partly because of the appeal of values that emerged after the *Analects* and which were not available to its authors, such as autonomy and rational self-determination. It is also due to 'modern' recognition that the diversity of ways of living a human life cannot easily be captured by a concrete social code of behaviour that applies to all. Given this, it is not easy to grasp the basis for the demand for obedience to 'higher' figures beyond the recognition that some possess greater knowledge or experience, as when parents are wiser than children, or teachers more experienced than students.¹⁵⁸

The distinction between text and later tradition is important here. Without denying that an ethically troubling account of obligation and compliance can be read into the *Analects*, the distinction alerts us to the thought that there might be alternative ways of conceptualising the *Analects*' linkage of personal relationships and ethical conduct, which were obscured by the interpretations of the later tradition. In the next section, I will explore such an alternative linkage.

This alternative reading appeals to an alternative account of obligation, beyond the multiple obligations to uphold concrete norms or duties pertaining to particular people. Its object is more general in nature and, I suggest, it can be inferred from the text and extrapolated even though not explicitly theorised within it. This should not surprise us, given the epigrammatic and gnomic quality of the text. Further, this account of obligation avoids the three objections (tradition, narrowness of scope and oppression). Such obligation is ethical obligation; it thus makes clear how the norms pertaining to personal relationships in the text can, after all, be part of a genuinely ethical vision.

¹⁵⁸ This is not to say that such compliance is indefensible. See note 39 above on the possible moral psychology of *wulun*.

4.3 An alternative conception of ethical obligation: serial personal obligation

I suggest that the ethical significance of the many norms pertaining to personal relationships be understood not as many individual duties, each demanding compliance, but rather in terms of their *collective effect* on a human subject. They create a subject with a particular kind of sensibility. It is one for whom, in phenomenological terms, the outstanding objects of experience are the people who enter and share its local social world. Such a sensibility is the result of living in a social world structured by multiple and sustained demands to identify those around within a social nexus of relationships (such as family or kin relations) and to comply with the applicable social roles and norms. These repeated calls to attend to the particulars of other people cultivate another, more general, sense of obligation, one independent of more particular and concrete practical obligations.¹⁵⁹ For convenience, let's call it *serial personal obligation*. This can be described as a sense of obligation to engage with each person one encounters, and to seek a basis for familiarity that can guide interaction.¹⁶⁰ Stated another way, the cultivation of multiple personal relationships becomes an *ethical task*, one distinct from mere compliance with practical norms.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Such a general and prima facie obligation to engage is not stated directly in the text. But stating things in this general way is a fair description of the ideal subject depicted in the text (I discuss this ideal character below). The text does suggest this pervasive sense of obligation at times. For example, it is the refusal to serve, to work with or for a ruler, rather than the taking up of office that requires justification (18.6 and 18.7), suggesting a standing obligation to engage.

¹⁶⁰ I wish to defer discussion of what it is that personal interaction aims at until the next chapter. But, in broad strokes, by 'basis for familiarity' I mean finding out how best to act towards that person, such that both parties can get along, are generally satisfied with the interaction and so on – enjoying some of the goods associated with personal relationships, such as practical help and self-esteem. This might require varying degrees of knowledge of the other's details, and draw on features of oneself. Also, finding a basis for familiarity does not require a faux familiarity, wondrous altruism or self-sacrifice; it can be achieved gradually and in a piecemeal way, and can be realised to varying degrees.

¹⁶¹ There is no reason to think this obligation to engage others is categorical, in a manner similar to the unconditional love identified by Christianity. A person need not be obliged to engage or befriend others regardless of how they are treated in return. There must be limits to such efforts, and the *Analecets* itself explores the conditions under which personal relationships could be terminated (see the discussion below). In fact, it is not clear that there is any particular act that a person categorically or unconditionally *must* do. Obligations sometimes conflict without any one consistently being assigned priority, and even familiar ethical obligations such as truth telling or promise keeping are overridden in some circumstances. Whether a single definitive form of ethical obligation can be identified is a question for further research; here I assume that there are different forms of deep and important (and hence 'ethical') obligation, of which the *Analecets* presents one form. Another question is how commanding or categorical obligation is. Other

The more concrete obligations inherent in social norms cultivate the second, more general sense of obligation, serial personal obligation. The effects of this sense of obligation on conduct, however, extend beyond the requisite actions bound up with specific norms and roles. Although both forms of obligation create familiarity and guide interaction, the second form of obligation is not limited to specific means or actions; rather, it allows that appropriate conduct can sometimes be undefined and open to greater imaginative interpretation.¹⁶²

This idea of serial personal obligation helps to make sense of the *Analects*. It explains why personal relationships are mentioned so extensively in the text and also why the kinds of relationships addressed extend far beyond the five cardinal relationships: the development of such a sensibility requires that a person be sensitised to a variety of relationships that arise in a variety of contexts. More importantly, it makes sense of the extensive discourse about the conduct of personal relationships that does not focus on concrete practical norms but rather on ideals, virtues and interpersonal attitudes (I discuss these additional presentations of personal relationships below).

Another early Chinese text, the *Er Ya* (爾雅), helps to make clearer this second form of obligation. This lexicon contains over 100 terms for family members, suggesting awareness of a web of relationships more complex than that indicated by the five relationships doctrine.¹⁶³ The *Er Ya* itself does not make any explicit normative claims about conduct attaching to the types of relationship it identifies, unlike texts that explicitly discuss the five cardinal relationships and the responsibilities integral to them. But the detailed attention to personal relationships conveyed by the text, understood as a

aspects of ethical living can sometimes take priority over ethical obligation. Obligations seem sometimes to be ‘trumped’ by other ethical forces such as an altruistic motive or even the desire to reflect more carefully on a problematic situation, or when a promise is broken to aid a friend in urgent need (though this might also be a response to obligation). The sense of an ethical obligation is thus not always sufficient to secure the actions that it seems to require. These considerations suggest that taking serial personal obligation as an ethical obligation does not entail the absurd demand to forge personal attachments with absolutely all who share or enter one’s local social world. A helpful analogy is that of friendship. One might want to get to know another better, to befriend him, and yet existing practical commitments, including existing personal relationships, prevent this. The inclination remains, but is not realised in practice.

¹⁶² This explains why the text contains so few comments on what those in the ‘higher’ position owe to the more junior. Greater experience, along with a cultivated sense of serial personal obligation, fosters confidence that such obligation will be satisfied without guiding concrete normative prescriptions.

¹⁶³ For example chapter four, entitled ‘Explaining Relatives’ (Shiqin 釋親), lists numerous terms for formal kinship relations such as younger brother’s wife, son’s wife and so on; significantly, it offers only ways of distinguishing particular individuals, and not specific or requisite actions pertaining to such relations.

reflection of contemporary social values is, I would argue, ethically significant. But this is not because each of the hundred-plus terms was implicitly connected with specific roles and conduct not mentioned in the text. On the contrary, it is highly unlikely that each type of relationship could be subject to a set of norms regarding how to treat someone who stands in a certain position to oneself. There would simply be too many norms and too great a possibility for conflict and confusion. Instead, the *Er Ya*'s categorising of the social world in terms of multiple personal relationships hints at the creation of a subject especially sensitive to those encountered in the social world and disposed to identify them in terms of some form of social relation. Specifically, the concern to name social relationships such as 'mother's first brother's wife' or 'mother's second brother's son' does two things.

It draws the subject's attention to the subtle but important ways in which people differ from each other and, by extension, how relationships develop differently with different people. But it also makes a point about psychological conditioning. It conveys the conviction that a concern to use the right name-type for each relationship brings about greater attentiveness to every person encountered. The *Er Ya* is thus best understood not as an implicit demand for compliance with duties integral to social roles, but as part of an outlook that prizes a commitment to establish relationships with others, with an eye to their distinctive features.

Understanding personal obligation in this way also allows for a revised interpretation of the doctrine of *wulun*, at least in its earliest forms, prior to dynastic codification. It no longer refers simply to a fixed set of (unjustified) normative requirements, but becomes a device that habituates people into prioritising the cultivating and maintaining of personal relationships, as well as directing thought towards the particulars of those encountered. It is thus a *training device* that forms part of a moral vision that directs people's attention to personal relationships. This starts with the family (the main focus of the *wulun* doctrine) but a sense of obligation emerges that goes beyond it. As the ruler-minister relationship indicates, for the Confucians this ideal extends to the political realm. Understanding *wulun* this way makes apparent how (later) attempts to reify it, attributing to it fixed practical content and treating it as an ethical ideal in its own right, obscured the ethical vision of the *Analects*.

Having presented this alternative conception of ethical obligation, let us now consider what responses it affords to the three objections.

4.4 Serial personal obligation and replies to the three objections.

It is easy to see why the *objection from tradition* does not apply against this second form of obligation. It does not draw on traditional conventions and norms to structure a sense of obligation. Instead, obligation is directed towards particular people in the local social world. However, it might be argued that reading an account of serial personal obligation into the text is *too speculative*. It is *too far removed* from the text and from the Confucian tradition. Certainly, there is no explicit mention of the idea in the text itself. So we must explain why it is not explicitly presented in the text, how it is implicit in the text, and how it is part of the broader Confucian tradition.

In fact, we can account for this apparent discrepancy by offering a three-stage explanation. Firstly, something like this form of obligation *is* present in the tradition. The Chinese concern with *guanxi* (關係), understood as a concern to cultivate networks of personal connections, embodies it.¹⁶⁴

This ‘mis-representation’ objection can be expressed in another way, however: by claiming that the emphasis on family in the text and in tradition is incompatible with serial personal obligation. Whatever else the Confucian tradition emphasises, the family is central to it; there is a clear distinction between family and other people in general. But, the objection runs, this account of obligation does not recognise this boundary and gives insufficient weight to family matters. It is therefore a distortion of the tradition and the text.

This form of the objection can also be diffused, however. Firstly, although the family is important in the Confucian tradition, its ethical status within that tradition is less clear. Any contemporary attempt to integrate a Confucian account of the family into an ethical vision is likely to be nuanced and selective. For example, some contemporary writers seek to articulate a Confucianism in which the family plays a reduced role.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Admittedly, the relation between modern practices of *guanxi* and an ancient text such as the *Analects* is difficult to specify. I will postpone discussion of *guanxi* until chapter V. For an account of *guanxi* as a concern with forging a basis of familiarity with others, see Mayfair Yang (1994).

¹⁶⁵ Tan Sitong, noted above, was one such early contemporary thinker. See also Sor-Hoon Tan (2003).

Therefore, the relation between an ethical Confucian vision and the family – or, more precisely, which features of it are to be considered important and ethical – is less clear than this objection assumes.

The account of serial personal obligation is sensitive to this current dispute or re-evaluation of Confucian thought. It recognises that the Confucian account of the family as a set of incumbent duties was partly the product of a historical context whose relation to the contemporary era and contemporary ethical thinking is uncertain. At the same time, it both recognises that the family is integral to ethical living as the nurturing centre for ethical obligation, while also proposing that Confucian ethical obligation can extend beyond the family.

The text supports this reading of Confucian obligation. Its account of self-cultivation and the cultivated or consummate person, the *junzi*, includes an account of how individuals extend themselves beyond the family, and take on commitments and responsibility for a wider set of people. This is seen most clearly in the text's account of the stages of self-cultivation, from petty individual, through filial person to consummate person and sage. The scholar-apprentice (*shi* 士) is explicitly presented as one who has cultivated himself such that his concerns extend beyond the family; the *junzi* has an even broader range of concerns and skills; and the sage (*shengren* 聖人) – though barely attainable in a human life – is able to accommodate the widest possible range of concerns in his actions.¹⁶⁶ From such textual details, one can see that the idea of serial personal obligation is implicit in the *Analects*.¹⁶⁷

We can also explain why the idea of serial personal obligation was not explicitly developed in the text. In the early Confucian world, it is reasonable to suppose that a

¹⁶⁶ The passages that detail such extension most clearly are 13.20, which contrasts the scholar-apprentice and someone who is merely filial; 6.30, which details how the cultivated person confers benefits on others; and 16.8 where the cultivated person is in awe of the sage. Also relevant to this extension of concern are the classic metaphor of expanding concern and social responsibility outlined in the *Daxue* (Great Learning, trans. Legge, 2009) and the Mencian notion of extending concern (*tui* 推). Also, relating to the above discussion of *zhi* (直), here is a further illustration of the *Analects* redefining familiar terms for the purposes of articulating an ethical vision. For more on this ascent, see Ames and Rosemont (1998, p. 60-63).

¹⁶⁷ This is why claims that the *Analects* lacks the conceptual resources to guide interaction with strangers are mistaken (E.g., Ci 1999 - see footnote 28). Aside from this sense of obligation, it seems a truism that we typically reason analogously from how we (successfully) interact with familiar others to figure out how to relate to those new to us. This includes seeing the new and relatively unfamiliar person in terms of a comparison with family members.

person's local social world was largely made up of family and clan relations. Social and geographical mobility were limited. Therefore, both the obligations inherent in concrete social prescriptions pertaining to personal bonds and the more abstract form of serial personal obligation would, in practice, largely be directed towards the same group of people (though no doubt strangers and non-family members made some appearances). In terms of practical effect they would thus be largely indistinguishable. There would be no pressing reason to make a distinction between them, and the text reflects this.

The world has changed since the time of the early Confucians. Lives in affluent societies now involve much greater social mobility and interaction with a diverse range of people in the course of everyday life. A person's local social world is thus comprised of a greater variety of relationships. Families remain important to the cultivation of serial personal obligation, but the object of such obligation is now wider in scope than just the family. The two senses of obligation can thus now be more readily distinguished. Social change has given us a reason to make a theoretical distinction, which was lacking at the time of the text's formation. In this way, the account of serial obligation is both faithful to the text and sensitive to its historical context and limitations.¹⁶⁸

We can now see why the idea of serial personal obligation is both consistent with and implicit in the *Analects* and the Confucian tradition and, further, how it avoids some of the problems associated with an ethics rooted in traditional precedents. Not only this, but the idea is one that also has the power to inform contemporary thinking about ethical conduct.

The *narrow obligation objection* was a response to a perceived lack of consideration for strangers in concrete practical prescriptions and obligations that focused only on those with whom one stands in some form of socially defined relationship. Serial personal obligation avoids this objection because it makes no principled distinction

¹⁶⁸ There is also the question of whether immersion in family life, structured by specific duties and recognition of the roles and status of particular people, is *necessary* for serial personal obligation (in addition to being sufficient). The early Confucian theorists, we may suppose, would argue that no other means of cultivation is possible. Perhaps, for example, serial personal obligation can be cultivated by directly adumbrating it as its attractive features (see the next chapter). This point is important because if such obligation is independent of the family and is an important Confucian idea, then Confucianism would be compatible with certain contemporary ethical ideals or values such as autonomy or rational self-determination, which emerged only later, and which are sometimes understood to conflict with family commitments. Adequate treatment of this question awaits further research.

between those people who can be identified in terms of social or biological categories and those who cannot. It is simply an obligation to find a basis for familiarity with those one encounters in the local social world, whether or not the person encountered is a stranger.¹⁶⁹ In formal terms, it is an obligation that arises in response to any given person and is thus unrestricted and potentially universal in scope. This property makes it an ethical form of obligation.

It might be objected that we still have not identified a form of genuine ethical obligation. Arguably, ethical obligation is the demand that one's actions should reflect the interests of some kind of universal moral community. Such obligation is described in Kantian and consequentialist theory: a person is obliged to consider, when necessary, whether his or her actions can be universalised, their effects on distant others and the collective welfare, and so on. Such obligation demands thinking in terms of the widest possible group and treating each member equally. If such breadth of consideration is necessary for a genuine sense of ethical obligation, then serial personal obligation is not an ethical form of obligation, since it is directed to people encountered in the local world.

However, it is not clear that ethical obligation must have this 'universal' form, relating one's actions to an imagined and all-inclusive realm of beings or values. Some have suggested, for example, that this conception of obligation is merely one possible form of obligation, which has become dominant with the historical rise of bureaucratic forms of management and public rationality (Williams 1985). More importantly, many have argued that such a moral point of view, a view from nowhere, is impractical or humanly unachievable (Marilyn Friedman 1993, Iris Young 1986, Alasdair MacIntyre 1984). This is partly because it is impossible to know exactly what conditions or actions would satisfy such a lofty standard of justification. Given such doubts, there are grounds

¹⁶⁹ There is a difference between strangers passed on the street, who remain strangers and with whom one doesn't interact, and those who, though initially strangers, are encountered in a way that makes possible or incites a sense of obligation to figure out how to interact. But no sharp and principled distinction applies in everyday life and it is not clear that any single conceptually motivated distinction is needed. It seems that social context partly determines what happens in such cases. Regarding the plausibility of serial personal obligation, what matters is that the point at which a sense of such obligation arises arrives earlier or is more easily reached than when such an obligation is considered unimportant or ethically irrelevant. The possibility that the obligation might be embodied or enacted in conduct before it arises as a conscious thought governing action is consistent with a prominent theme of the early Confucian texts – that right action results from training and amassed experience rather than being the conscious product of a belief-desire set. This is seen in the Confucian commitment to learning by copying and training through ritualised practice. For further discussion of this alternative theory of action, see Hansen (2000, p.73-8).

for believing that the sense of obligation structured by such an ideal is not the most important form of obligation.¹⁷⁰ It is at least reasonable to explore other possible forms of ethical obligation, including that of finding a basis for familiarity and productive interaction with those one encounters in the local world.

This distinction between an obligation to interact with multiple individuals that is open-ended in scope, and an obligation to treat all people equally, is important for another reason. It maintains the philosophical distinctions between early Confucian and Mohist thought.

I have suggested that the *Analects* yields a conception of obligation that includes but can also extend beyond commitments to family or clan members. To some extent it demands a blindness regarding with whom one interacts. This might seem similar to the Mohist doctrine of *jianai* (兼愛) or ‘impartial caring’: the demand to care about other families (rulers, states and so on) as one cares about one’s own.¹⁷¹ But early Confucians and Mohists, as we have seen, take themselves to be representing opposing positions. Reading the text in terms of serial personal obligations might thus seem to attribute un-Confucian ideas to the Confucians.

The earlier discussion makes clear, however, that the two schools’ doctrines have not been conflated. The Mohists treat families and states as generic and commensurable kinds or types that are to be treated equally (i.e., in the same way), with action or policies following from this. On this account, ethical obligation thus involves recognising generic features of the social world (natural kinds such as families, etc), in a manner similar to the ideas of impersonal values or the moral considerability of generic persons. But serial personal obligation implies only that a person attend to, make an effort with, discrete particular people in the local social world. It entails no commitment to identify families or rulers in generic terms or to treating them equally. This is why serial personal obligation does not collapse Confucian thinking into Mohist ideals.

¹⁷⁰ But see Friedman (1993, chapter 1) for a defence of the ideal of impartiality even though the prospects for realising it are slight.

¹⁷¹ The *Jianai* (impartial caring) chapter reads: ‘Replace partiality with impartiality...If people regarded other people’s states in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own state to attack that of another?...If people regarded other people’s families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another?’ (Quoted in Ivanhoe and van Norden 2001, pp. 68-9, translated by PJ Ivanhoe).

How to defuse the *objection from oppression* should be apparent from the previous discussion. Although obedience to social duties within hierarchical relationships might sometimes be necessary, it can now be seen as a kind of training, which is necessary to develop this more general sense of obligation. Thus complying with prescribed social duties isn't simply an unjustified and oppressive obligation to obey, but a stepping stone to developing a sense of ethical obligation - to do one's best to find a basis for productive interaction with the people one meets. Further, if serial personal obligation is the more important form of obligation, taking priority over more concrete social prescriptions pertaining to particular individuals, then the obligation to obey norms is not ultimately binding. In the case of the cultivated person, the *junzi*, such norms can be overturned in order to ensure a basis for familiarity, and a productive or harmonious way of interacting.

It might be objected that introducing serial personal obligation merely involves swapping one form of oppression for another. The oppressive demand for obedience in specific social duties is replaced by the oppressive demand to engage personally with those one meets. This second demand conflicts with the ideal of voluntary association with others. For example, there is some tension here with the ideal of freely choosing friends.¹⁷²

It should be remembered that obligation itself, as a phenomenological experience, has the form of compulsion and the overriding of desires. And if a sense of obligation is a necessary component of an ethical life, as is widely believed, then a sense of the voluntary and the following of one's desires must be impinged upon at some point, so why not personal relationships? After all, the commitment to attend to the particulars of other people and engage with them need not be so oppressive. It is compatible with one developing a relationship in ways that present opportunities for self-expression, self-discovery and even help in realising other desires (without the relationship becoming purely instrumental). This form of obligation can be a creative experience that utilizes

¹⁷² Much depends on whether friends really are freely chosen, or whether people merely think this is so. It might be for example, that friends emerge from among the limited set of people with whom one is able to interact (given constraints of time, energy and geography); or perhaps friendship arises by discovering commonalities or a suitability that was already inherent in two lives and characters.

one's own thoughts and characteristics. Serial personal obligation thus need be no more oppressive than other possible forms of ethical obligation.

Defusing these three objections provides ground for thinking of general personal obligation as a form of genuine ethical obligation. It should be remembered, however, that it remains bound in an uncertain relationship with a form of obligation – that of obeying concrete social prescriptions – that is less easily reconciled with certain widely-accepted modern values. Ultimately, however, this uncertainty does not preclude reading the *Analects* as presenting an ethical vision structured by the features of personal relationships. Acceptance or rejection of this vision depends on more than its conception of obligation, since the text's discussions of personal relationships extend beyond the *wulun* doctrine and demands to adhere to particular concrete standards. After all, if the significance of personal relationships was exhaustively defined by the five cardinal relationships and obedience to conventional standards, then why are such relationships associated with becoming a *junzi*? The *junzi* is one who draws people to him, one who makes the grass bend, rather than submitting to others. It is the richness of the text's insights into the features of personal relationships that makes plausible the claim that the latter constitute an ethical vision. Accordingly, we must examine how the *Analects* structures other generic categories of ethical conduct around personal relationships, turning next to practical reasoning.

5. Practical reasoning and practical judgment

By 'practical reasoning' I mean the ways in which actions are suggested to the subject and how the subject arrives at choices or practical judgments about what to do. I take some account of practical reasoning to be integral to any conception of ethical living. How does the *Analects* conceive of 'ethical' practical reasoning?

Some writers have suggested that the *Analects* lacks a conception of practical reasoning and deliberative choice. Herbert Fingarette plays with the figurative meaning of *dao* as a road, and notes the *Analects*' failure to make the obvious inference that a road includes crossroads or forks where choices are made. He takes this metaphorical omission as evidence of a lack of deliberative practical reasoning in the text. Fingarette's metaphorical manoeuvres are, I believe, misguided. The *Analects* does offer a

commentary on practical reasoning; although what it says is different from more familiar conceptions of practical reason and judgment. In what follows, I consider what sources of certainty or conviction the *Analects* identifies to guide action, how it presents practical deliberation and also how personal relationships are integral to these.

The first point to note is the prominence of scepticism and reticence about speaking in the text, and how these restrict the scope (what can be judged) and grounds (on what basis) for making evaluative judgments. There is a striking lack of interest in producing a fundamental description of the world or human beings qua definite properties and causal relations and mechanisms. Confucius didn't speak about human nature or a divinely created order or even a spirit world (5.13). The ambitions for conscious evaluative judgments are thus accordingly limited, since they cannot be grounded in divine command, or objective values that can be read off the surface of an empirical world or in accounts of a generic human and what constitutes the good for it.

One topic is less subject to sceptical doubt: what has already been done or enacted – i.e., history and the past. This can form a guide for judgment and practical action. Studying what others have done in the past and absorbing one's cultural legacy (*wen*) are components of multi-faceted ideal of learning (*xue*) (1.6). We should note that this is, in fact, further evidence of scepticism about the possibility of *ahistorical* standards for judging conduct. But while historical precedent certainly plays a role in structuring judgments of action, here too, I would argue, is a degree of epistemic modesty, which expresses itself as flexibility in conduct. The historical Confucius did not 'claim or demand certainty' and was 'not inflexible' (9.4); and he was neither for nor against but went with what was appropriate (4.10).¹⁷³

Equally significant is the text's cautious stance towards the relationship between language and action. The capacity of language to fully explicate or represent the effects of action is questioned (2.13, 4.22).¹⁷⁴ The mature Confucius is portrayed as one who

¹⁷³ Confucius seems to be flexible about changes in ritual practice - as long as changes sustained a sense of harmony). See, for example, 6.6 on using alternative oxen in sacrifice and 9.3 on changes in permissible ritual attire.

¹⁷⁴ 4.22 reads: 'The ancients were reluctant to speak, since this brought shame upon oneself.' (古者言之不出，恥躬之不逮也). 2.13 seems to suggest that the action one does in fact perform emerges only through engaging in action, rather than first describing the action and then acting: 'First enact what you would say and then say it.' (先行其言，而後從之).

appreciates the dangers of failing to consider the relation between language and action (including the prediction of events), and who limits expectations and speculation about what might follow from a person's speech (5.10). The ethical person is someone who is reluctant to speak (*ren* 讷), and this is constitutive of personal excellence (*ren* 仁) (12.3). Those who act 'ethically' either cannot or are not willing to state too directly or in abstract terms what ethical conduct consists in.¹⁷⁵

Despite the strong presence of such scepticism and reticence, one topic in the *Analects* is not subject to such doubt: this is the matter of personal relationships. Their value is rarely questioned in the text. For example, the questions of whether the individual's good is consistent with the good of those with whom we stand in relationships, including family, is not raised. In contrast to doubts about other possible foundations for practical judgments, the text conveys confidence that personal relationships can guide action.¹⁷⁶ We have already seen this in the sheep-stealing example, and in the text's extensive presentation on practical prescriptions focusing on personal relationships.

So much for the foundations and features of the world that the ethical subject can draw on in selecting an action. What does the text say about the actual process of practical deliberation?

Fingarette and Hansen are correct when they claim that the role of practical deliberation in the text is limited. This is not to say, of course, that individuals did not reflect on how they acted, only that the issue of practical reflection and judgment is not a prominent theoretical concern in the *Analects* account of ethical living. There is little concern, for example, with public debate about what kinds of institutions and norms should order society. Contrast this with Plato's concern to articulate acceptable public standards that can be used as a measure of and standard for judging conduct and policies, as seen in the *Euthyphro* (5d) for example. Similarly, the text lacks the details of

¹⁷⁵ For other passages on the limits to moral *discourse*, see 1.14, 2.18, 14.4, 14.20, 15.11, 17.18, 17.19, and 19.25. Scepticism about the relation between language and ethical conduct is, in fact, a cross-school theme in Pre-Qin texts. See, for example, chapter one of the *Daodejing*, the *Xunzi* 21.1c, or the 'Knowledge Roams North' chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, discussed in Graham (1981, p. 158)

¹⁷⁶ One might contrast such confidence in the institution of personal relationships with Euthyphro's confidence in prosecuting his father for the sake of maintaining a standard or virtue governing the community as a whole.

Aristotle's discussion of the various deliberative skills and capacities involved in assessing practical options in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nor do we find the modern ideal of an impartial and disinterested rational subject, who is maximally sensitive to rational considerations as they are presented to him in the course of public dialogue or private reflection. While these three accounts all aim at describing correct or wise judgement, the *Analects* does not offer any developed theory of good judgment or ethical decision.

The character *zhi* (志) is perhaps the closest in meaning to the familiar idea of an individual will directing action, and might reasonably be thought to be the site in the text where discussions of deliberation and (moral) choice are made. However, in the *Analects* *zhi* is not strongly associated with the idea of reflective, or even conscious, choice. Instead, it is associated with qualities such as determination, persistence and endurance; that is, on being set on some end or mode of living and working consistently (and not always reflectively) towards it.¹⁷⁷ Sometimes endurance is more central to acting well than reflection. In fact, where such discussions of practical reason might arise in the text we typically find notably different accounts of how action is produced. Repetition, learning, modelling, concern for family and following prescriptions pertaining to personal relationships and ritual are all more important to determining conduct.¹⁷⁸ These alternative sources of conduct suggest that acting well does not necessarily derive from conscious reasoning or deliberation. The text's emphasis on learning (學 *xue*) also supports this idea. The ideal of loving learning (好學 *haoxue*)¹⁷⁹ is a demand for the careful and persistent observing of the world around and the absorption of relevant features. This is significant because the absorbing, imitating and persistence that are integral to *xue*-ing, also contrast with an approach to action based on assertion and

¹⁷⁷ The carrying of a heavy burden and of gradual, incremental and even unnoticed changes in behaviour (for the better) are common themes in the text. See for example 8.7: 'Scholar-apprentices (*shi*) cannot but be strong and resolved for they bear a heavy burden and their way is long'. See also 9.19, 9.22 and *passim*.

¹⁷⁸ The character 權 (*quan* literally, scales or to weigh) could be read as a reflective, deliberative weighing. However, it occurs only three times in the text, all in the last three chapters, and in only two cases might it have this reflective meaning. Further, in these passages it might also be read as 'according with official weights and measures' – i.e., according with agreed standards. In fact, *quan* has this meaning in 20.1, where it refers to reviving (disused) official weights and measures. Regardless, *quan* is not developed as a means of guiding action and is not a central concern of the text.

¹⁷⁹ For further discussion of learning see 5.28, 7.28 and 8.17.

deliberative judgment. While the latter moves from the facts, standards and rational considerations already in one's possession to a judgment, *xue* partly implies seeing oneself not as a judge responding to explicit (ethical) criteria, but as one who absorbs experiences, knowledge and 'culture' and thereby becomes more able to respond practically – without necessarily first resorting to judgment (and perhaps being unable to articulate the source of or reasons for that response).¹⁸⁰ This contrast between practical deliberation and learning is well summed up in by 15.31: 'I once went a whole day without eating and a whole night without sleeping for the sake of reflection. It was not enriching, and could not compare to learning.'¹⁸¹

In fact, it is not quite true that the *Analects* lacks an account of practical reasoning. The characters *si* (思) and *xing* (省) refer to something like 'thinking' or 'reflection'. These could be understood in terms of practical reasoning, although, as noted above, the terms are not discussed directly in the text and thus their exacting meaning is open to speculation.¹⁸² What is striking, however, is that where issues of choice and something approaching practical reasoning are most apparent in the text, they are directed towards issues involving personal relationships, and friendship in particular (*you* 友). That is, when we are to think about action, our thoughts should be thoughts about other people. For example, *si* often refers to making thoughtful comparisons between oneself and the other people in one's local social world.¹⁸³ The idea that reflection about how to act arises in and is directed towards personal relationships is expressed most clearly in 1.4:

¹⁸⁰ Of course, the *junzi* is one who can judge, and the text features many judgments. But the *junzi* is an ideal figure, one for whom the need for learning is reduced. Hence, the judgments in the text are not counterexamples to this understanding of *xue*; rather they mark the points at which *xue* has been completed or is unnecessary. That Confucius' 'judgments' at 7.0 are perfectly appropriate is a result of his advanced learning as much as excellent practical deliberation. Further, it is not clear that these judgments are based on any clear criteria or standards that are articulated prior to judgment. Rather they are credible because of learning and context, even though these might be difficult to describe to one disputing the appropriateness of the action.

¹⁸¹ This passage must be read with 2.15, which depicts a more balanced and integrated account of learning and reflection. However, the same critical stance towards reflection and preference for learning is repeated in the *Xunzi*, suggesting that this lexical ordering was important in the early Confucian lineage.

¹⁸² *Si* appears 25 times in the text, in nine passages. Although this might be thought to indicate a key concept, it is often used repetitively, in phrases such as 'The virtuous person, in seeing a profit, thinks (*si*) of appropriateness (*yi* 義). See, for example, 14.12 and 19.1. Rarely is it discussed, unlike for example, *ren* (仁). *Xing* appears in only four passages and appears to indicate introspection.

¹⁸³ See 4.17, which states that on encountering a worthy person one uses him or her to reflect on and order one's own conduct; meeting an unworthy person is also cause for introspection (見賢思齊焉: 見不賢而內自省也).

Zengzi said: ‘There are three aspects of myself that I reflect (*xing*) upon daily. In my dealings with other people, have I failed to do my utmost? In my interactions (*jiao*) with friends (*you*) have I failed to make good on my word? In what has been passed on to me, have I failed to put it into practice?’

This passage shows that when practical reasoning and deliberation are finally given a fuller description, the majority of the questions that guide such reflection direct the subject’s thought to personal attachment.¹⁸⁴

The above discussion suggests limited prospects for what an individual’s practical judgment can achieve. The text is sceptical about the ideal of making categorical statements and judgments about action, particularly those intended to apply across a broad range of superficially distinct social contexts or human lives. The ethical person of the *Analects* cannot appeal to very general principles of conduct in order to generate action, as the text recognises no sure foundation for them. Instead, practical reasoning is brought to bear on what is close at hand. The modest project of reflecting on a more local and familiar world is sufficient to become a cultivated person (*ren*).¹⁸⁵ What is relevant to discussion is that the local world of the *Analects* is, as we have seen, largely made up of personal attachments.

There is one further way of showing that the *Analects*’ account of practical reasoning is informed by personal relationships. It can be inferred from the text’s visceral concern with the matter of starting and terminating personal relationships.

The practical problem of with whom to associate is raised frequently in the text. For example, in 4.6, we find that cultivated persons do not associate with uncultivated conduct or uncultivated people (*burenzhe* 不仁者). The reader is also warned against becoming close (*qin* 親) with those who are not good or who do bad things (*weibushanzhe* 爲不善者).¹⁸⁶ Confucius also refuses to be associated with suspect rulers. Mindful that political office meant a personal relationship, such as that of ruler to minister, the text shows a concern with carefully selecting which political relations to

¹⁸⁴See also 16.10 where an ideal description of the *junzi*’s thoughts is presented. Here, too, the majority of ‘mental tasks’ are directed towards relationships. These include reflections on deference (恭 *gong*), about doing one’s utmost in relationships and roles (*zhong*), respectfulness towards others (*jing*) and the proper countenance or body language (*se*).

¹⁸⁵See 19.6: ‘To learn broadly and be earnest in one’s endeavor, to question all and reflect on what is close at hand, *ren* (authoritative conduct) lies in this’ (博學而篤志，切問而近思；仁在其中矣).

¹⁸⁶17.7: As for becoming close to those who do bad things, the cultivated person does not engage in this (親於其身為不善者，君子不入也).

commit to and cultivate (9.6, 17.20).¹⁸⁷ Carefully *choosing* which relationships to enter and which to avoid, as well as determining when a relationship should be abandoned, are crucial ethical concerns. Here is the crossroad that Fingarette missed: the need to choose personal associations wisely.

The role of individual judgment in forming relationships is seen most clearly in the discussions of friendship (*you* 友).¹⁸⁸ In the *Analects* friendship can be both a means to self-cultivation and a source of personal harm. The text notes three forms of friendship that augment character and three that diminish it (16.4). Friendship is also a demanding experience. It requires ceaselessly setting an example (13.1), doing one's best (患), and being trustworthy (信). It is in this context that discretion in forming relationships is advised. One should 'befriend the authoritative' (15.10); most strikingly, one should not befriend those who are not one's equal (1.8).¹⁸⁹

Why the text makes entering and leaving personal relationships such a prominent practical question is philosophically puzzling. Aristotle, for example, also discusses personal relationships at great length in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, yet pays little attention to this question. So why is the *Analects* so concerned with starting and terminating relationships? The answer, I believe, relates to how the Confucians viewed the nature and limits of practical reasoning.

The *Analects* suggests that conduct and character are easily changed through engagement in personal relationships, for better or for worse.¹⁹⁰ This Confucian belief

¹⁸⁷ Arguably, historical exemplars, which are used in the text extensively to convey standards for action, should also be understood within the framework of personal relationships, akin to personal teachers. By personalizing historical events and identifying with actors, through empathy and other imaginative means, the authority conveyed by the historical figures and the standards they espoused is augmented by the awe and respect felt towards actual people. This would explain Mencius' suggestion that the most virtuous people, superior to all around them, must turn to history for friends (尚友 5A10).

¹⁸⁸ The semantic range of the character *you* 友 (and also that of *peng* 朋) is not entirely clear from the text and has been much discussed. It refers less to the familiar idea of a close friend who shares hobbies and various social activities and about whom one cares greatly, and more to people of similar status or outlook who share a vocation. Zhu Xi suggests *you* refers to those who share a common mindset or outlook, while *peng* refers to those who share a master or school. For discussions of *you* see Norman Kutcher (2000), Aat Vervoorn (2004), Hall and Ames (1991), Sor Hoon-Tan (2003) and Maria Khayutina (1999).

¹⁸⁹ The importance of this last injunction is clear from the fact that the text repeats it, at 9.25.

¹⁹⁰ The *Analects*' treatment of friendship thus contrasts with Aristotle's claim that the highest form of friendship arises between people of settled character who are already good. For Aristotle such friendship consists in recognition of already existing goodness and the sharing in the activities particular to good people (NE IX.9). See also May Sim's comparison of Confucian and Aristotelian friendship (pp. 194-212, 2007)

that character is not fixed but is open to social influence partly explains the importance attributed to decisions about which relationships to initiate or terminate. However, the discourse on entering relationships reveals more about how the *Analects* views practical reasoning.

It implies the view that practical reasoning about what to do is not as powerful a force in determining conduct as personal relationships. Participation in relationships affects character and judgment to a greater degree than an individual can comprehend from within a relationship. In the case of inauspicious relationships, for example, practical reasoning is unable to compensate fully for the deleterious effects of that relationship.¹⁹¹ This relates to the claim made in chapter II, that personal relationships are diffuse and complex experiences such that they are difficult to articulate, and to value in comparison with other concerns or values. It also draws on the difficulty of objectively or fairly assessing the rightness or wrongness of actions of people from within a personal relationship: our judgments are compromised by affections and personal involvement. But this refers not only to actions of those particular people, but to how relationships condition judgement of types of action in general. The simplest example of this is how parents' values condition the views of their children. The ideal is that individual reflection can undo this influence where it is inappropriate; the *Analects* suggests this is a vain hope. Despite phenomenological appearances or the first person experience of choosing for (good) reasons, it is personal relationships that guide choice, rather than choice guiding personal relationships.

The early Confucian texts confirm this view that personal attachment directs conduct in ways that escape self-conscious scrutiny. They frequently portray the imperceptible influence that others have on us as a weighty practical force. This is seen most clearly in the influence ascribed to the *junzi* in a community. This is someone who brings change to people without their even realising that their conduct is changing.¹⁹² Mencius 7A13 summarises the power of this personal influence. Under a 'true king', people:

¹⁹¹ The idea that environment and personal relationships affect character is a prominent theme in Confucian texts. For example, the literature on Mencius includes the tale of his mother's concern in selecting an appropriate environment for her son (see DC Lau 1970, appendix II); Xunzi often repeats the theme summed up by the famous phrase that 'lilies that grow in black sand will become black'. (*Xunzi*, chapter 1)

¹⁹² See, for example, the *Analects* 2.1 and 2.3.

[M]ove daily towards goodness without realising who it is that brings this about. A gentleman transforms where he passes and works wonders where he abides (trans. Lau 1970).

Although this passage refers to sages and true kings, the basic principle is the same: that people influence each other in ways that can escape clear articulation. This point also further illuminates the earlier discussion of 13.18, and the claim that the family is bound up with a conception of justification. We can now see that this account of justification draws on both factual, backward looking reasons and for forward-looking, hopeful reasons. ‘Backward’ because the family determines behaviour in ways not easily determined, and attempts to apply specific conceptually-fixed standards of judgment should respect this; ‘forward’ because familiar others can do as much to reform or redirect our conduct as the law and accompanying threat of punishments and, crucially, our own attempts at reflection.

Where practical reasoning is effective is in choosing in advance – so far as that is possible – the relationships one enters, which thereby determines the sensibilities and interests we will develop. Of course, one cannot in fact choose who one will become through the relationship – but that is exactly the point: that practical reasoning cannot fully track and amend the influence that personal attachment has on conduct. But practical deliberation can at least sometimes offer an assessment, from the outside, of what a relationship might be like, prior to coming under the influence of that relationship. This, I suggest, is the primary ethical task of practical reasoning according to the *Analects*.

Understanding practical reasoning in the *Analects* in this way appears to lead to a tension between what has so far been said. This is between the claims about practical reasoning and what I said about the nature of obligation in the *Analects*. If obligation in the *Analects* is understood as a kind of persistent ethical demand to find a basis for familiarity with others, i.e., to engage with others, then this seems to conflict with the careful choosing of personal relationships. Engagement in personal relationships becomes both voluntary and non-voluntary.

The first move in resolving this apparent tension, or at least to absolve oneself from the sin of inaccurate representation of the text, is to note that the text itself recognises such a tension. In 19.3 we find disagreement about whether one should

associate only with the worthy or whether one should engage more widely with others and be ‘tolerant of everyone’:

The disciples of Zi Xia asked Zi Zhang about the principles that should characterise mutual intercourse (*jiao* 交). Zi Zhang asked, ‘What does Zi Xia say on the subject?’ They replied, ‘Zi Xia says: ‘Associate with those who can advantage you. Put away from you those who cannot do so.’ Zi Zhang observed, ‘This is different from what I have learned. The superior man honours the talented and virtuous, and bears with all. He praises the good, and pities the incompetent. Am I possessed of great talents and virtue? - who is there among men whom I will not bear with? Am I devoid of talents and virtue? - men will put me away from them. What have we to do with the putting away of others?’

The alleged tension here is between forming relationships on the basis of advantage and associating with others in a less critical fashion. A typical response to this passage is to resolve the tension by decisively identifying which of the two disciples’ comments was the authentically Confucian one.¹⁹³

However, I believe there is no conflict here that needs resolving. Firstly, both thinkers represent important strands of the Confucian vision; both views are present in the text (as we have it today) and there is no decisive reason to favour one interpretation or the other. As with the well-known *zhengming* (rectification of names) passage (13.3), so 19.3 can be regarded as a later interpolation and a sign of an important and ongoing philosophical debate. The passage confirms the importance of personal relationships to the Confucian ethical vision; so much so that later Confucians were compelled to comment on what was obviously a troubling tension to them.

Secondly, the conceptual tension can also be resolved. One can take the discourse on choosing relationships to be limited to a certain kind of relationship. As noted above, choice is emphasised mainly with respect to the friendship relationship, and perhaps in the selection of a ruler to serve.¹⁹⁴ Other relationships might involve a stronger sense of obligation and less evaluation. More subtly, and in keeping with what has been argued so far, the tension can also be resolved by noting the difference (but not a contradiction) between an ideal that serves as a standard for conduct – that of cultivating personal relationships or a basis for familiarity with others – and a practical concern with effects of engagement, which requires caution and deliberation. The prescription to engage is ethically basic, a persistent obligation to be receptive to those around, but it is only in

¹⁹³ For one example of how this impasse is resolved see Hall and Ames’ argument that Zixia represents the ‘more literal understanding of Confucian friendship’ (1994, p. 85).

¹⁹⁴ That friendship is a relationship calling for discretion and choice is clear from 12.23.

force as long as one does not discover reasons that overpower it. One can experience an obligation to engage while also thinking carefully about whether one should engage. If there is reason to think that a relationship will cause harm, it is reasonable to avoid developing that relationship or withdraw.¹⁹⁵ Although personal relationships are a vital instrument to living well, engagement in them is not an unconditional requirement; and as we saw the obligation to engage with others is not unconditional. It is one of the means by which we arrive at ethical conduct, but sometimes acting ethically draws on other features of ethical conduct (such as motivation or practical reasoning). Let us turn to two others: the virtues and cultivated character.

6. An account of ideal character or virtues

Any conception of ethical conduct entails some picture of what an ethical agent is like, his personal qualities, even if it amounts only to a description of one or two virtues.¹⁹⁶ Even ethical egoists presume an account of ideal character – it is one who pursues his own interests, who does not, for example, vacillate over what to do, suppress all of his desires and so on.

The *Analects*' account of ideal or cultivated character, and the virtues that partly constitute it, are constructed from the experiences and practices of personal relationships. A central element of the *Analects* ethical vision, and a template for how to live, is the cultivated or excellent individual, the *junzi*. I will explore how the text links the achievement of such an elevated and admired character to engagement in personal relationships.

This happens in three ways. Firstly, such engagement is instrumentally necessary to attain this refined state; secondly, the virtues of the *junzi* are interpersonal excellences; finally, what is admirable about such a person is, in fact, a personal sensibility, a certain personal approach to those around. One might say that the excellence of the ideal person

¹⁹⁵ Indeed the threat of withdrawal is understood by the *Analects* as a powerful means of ensuring ethical conduct, as long as it is used responsibly. Confucius was not afraid to 'roll up his mat' and retreat if the situation demanded it.

¹⁹⁶ Arguably, the Kantian account of ethical conduct places great weight on a single virtue – the disposition to be ruled by a virtuous will.

consists in the attainment of an excellent quality of interaction. I will consider these in turn.

6.1 Personal relationships are necessary for self-cultivation.

The text suggests that personal relationships are the medium or context through which self-cultivation is achieved. It requires a sensitivity to and disposition to engage with others in the world around. We are told that the existence of other refined people is a pre-condition of becoming excellent (5.3); one must ‘not lose those to whom one is close’ (1.13), and should ‘worry about failing to know others’ (1.16).

The text also identifies *methods* of cultivation that are interpersonal in nature. Firstly, it entails a perceptual aspect, which requires closely *observing and ‘absorbing’ other persons’ conduct and demeanour*. The character *guan* (observation 觀) frequently indicates such action. For example, passage 2.10 exhorts us to ‘watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won’t you know what kind of person they are?’ Perhaps the classic expression of this constant willingness to pay attention to those around as a means to self-cultivation is 7.22 – Confucius’ insistence that when getting together with just two others, one can begin to observe and learn from them.¹⁹⁷ As noted above, careful observation is credited with producing appropriate action and is thus both analogous to and partly replaces practical reasoning.

Cultivating oneself also involves frequent *interpersonal comparisons*, or drawing analogies (*bi* 譬) with others close at hand (6.30, 17.12). Such behaviour is characteristic of Confucius’ students (5.9, 4.17, 5.26, and 11.26). Again, we see that self-cultivation starts from attending to the particulars of those around, and proceeds by engaging another personally (though not necessarily forming a close personal relationship).

A final ‘method’ in self-cultivation is a disposition to *act for* others, as well as correlating one’s actions with others. People wanting to establish themselves (*li* 立) or ‘arrive’ (*da* 達) do so by attending to others (6.30), while the *junzi* ‘brings out the best in

¹⁹⁷ Further examples of this injunction to carefully observe those around one include the following. 12.20 describes successful scholar-apprentices (*shi* 士) as ‘keen observers of demeanour’. 1.11 (repeated at 4.20) outlines how a son learns from his father by observing his ways during his lifetime: ‘When one’s father is alive, pay attention (*guan*) to what he strives for, when he dies pay attention (*guan*) to the practices he established.’ And 4.7 suggests that becoming *ren* involves observing (and learning from) the mistakes (*guo* 過) of others.

others' (12.16, 成人之美), and Confucius 'instructs others without growing weary' (7.34). To act for another is to learn, since as one focuses on the situation with a view to acting, and proceeds to act, so new ideas and new possibilities for action are stimulated.

Finally, developing relations with others is not merely a means of self-cultivation - it is also a *measure* of it. As the Han lexicon the *Shuowen Jiezi* notes, the *junzi* (jun 君) is one around whom people gather (*qun* 群: to gather).¹⁹⁸ Self-cultivation is seen not in excellence in theoretical reason, nor in practical deliberation or in some kind of practical medium such as arts and crafts (although these are necessary elements), but in how one relates to others. This link between one's fitness for personal relationships and one's degree of cultivation is nicely summed up in verse 17.26, where one's standing with others is used as a standard to assess character: 'Anyone who *inspires dislike* at the age of forty is hopeless' (italics added).¹⁹⁹

6.2 The ethical virtues as virtues of personal relationships

In the *Analects* the virtues or excellences of character that constitute living well are virtues of interpersonal interaction: the features of personal relationships are the basis for a description of what personal excellence consists in.

Not all virtues mentioned in the text have an obvious interpersonal aspect. Wisdom (*zhi* 知) and courage (*yong* 勇), for example, do not. But it is a striking feature of the text that many virtues deal with how to relate to another in a personal way. The most obvious of these are loyalty or doing one's best in the context of a relationship (*zhong*), empathy or reciprocity (*shu*) and trust (*xin*).²⁰⁰ To these might be added the virtues that are regularly associated with the five cardinal relationships, such as *qin* (親, treating someone with affection or like a member of one's family), *ai* (愛, care, concern or loving), *ci* (慈, love and affection towards the younger), *ti* (悌, brotherliness or

¹⁹⁸ That the most complete form of cultivation is expressed relationally is an idea found in the text itself. In 4.25 we find: 'The virtuous person (德) is not alone, he is sure to have neighbours'.

¹⁹⁹ Similarly, one of the distinctive powers of the *junzi* is to like or dislike others as appropriate (4.3). Not only does excellence involve a judgment of character, it also involves an affective attitude towards particular people.

²⁰⁰ For example, it is notable that the 'unifying' and 'making one thread' that constitutes Confucius' vision (4.15) is composed of two explicitly relational strands: *zhong* (忠 faithful and persistent application) and *shu* (恕 empathy and awareness of standards in dealings with others). *Zhong* is a commitment to do one's best in relationships and serve as a mentor if required (14.7), while *shu* is the ethical sensibility that grounds the Golden or Silver Rule (15.25).

recognition of seniority) and, more generally, filial piety (孝 *xiao*). The fact that so many of the text's virtues are clustered around the discourse on personal relationships supports the argument that the ideal Confucian character consists in dispositions and sensitivities that are manifested in the conducting of personal relationships.

Here, however, I want to focus on some less widely discussed virtues. This is because it is difficult to understand these as virtues – especially in comparison with contemporary ideals such as autonomy and integrity – unless we see personal relationships as constitutive of the *Analect's* ethical vision.

The first such virtue or disposition is deference (*gong* 恭). The idealised form of conduct implied by this virtue can be made clearer through the character's close association with the visceral act of greeting (*gong* 拱), or taking care to manifest personal regard to those one meets. It also has semantic connections with vastness or greatness (*hong* 洪). Notably, the practical effects of *gong* (恭) are directly compared to those of ritual (*li* 禮).²⁰¹ Both bring about harmony: ritual specifies or scripts action, while deference applies to situations not covered by ritual, which are typically thought of as matters of discretion or individual judgment. Deference adds an extra dimension to such contextual action, however, emphasising care in interpersonal stance.

The text states one benefit of such deference: it helps avoid disgrace and insult (1.13). But another benefit can be sketched, which complements the limited role of practical reasoning in the text. Deference helps secure a more favourable judgment of one's actions than would otherwise be the case, and this is important given the doubts noted earlier about the possibility of objective and accurate judgment of other people's conduct.²⁰² The text assumes that people's treatment of others is partly based on their attitudes or affective stances towards them,²⁰³ that is, their judgments are constituted

²⁰¹ 1.13 tells us that *gong* brings one close to the ideal of (well-performed) ritual, just as speaking with care is indicative of appropriateness (*yi* 義). However, there are limits to the extent to which one should defer and show respect: 'Glib talking [and] excessive deference (足恭) are shameless' (5.25).

²⁰² It is not that all conduct was beyond the realm of reasonably impartial and objective judgment. Certainly, ritually prescribed forms of conduct could be neglected and judgments and blame applied. The point is only one of degrees, and the extent to which such judgments faltered, shorn of their force by a lack of the kind of clear moral standards that usually guide decisive ethical judgments.

²⁰³ We have seen how dislike is treated as a standard of personal assessment, and the importance and desirability of a person's public standing – their reputation (*ming* 名) – is also widely discussed. A good reputation is not to be pursued at any cost, however. This is one of the vices of the 'thief of virtue'

more by their affective responses than by clear, self-apparent criteria that guide such evaluative judgments (practical reasoning as principled judgment is largely lacking from the text). This is why it is preferable to cultivate deferential conduct, and so induce others to err on the side of charity in their judgments.

Another virtue or ideal of character that emphasises the centrality of personal relationships to ethical life is yielding or being pliant (*rang* 讓).²⁰⁴ The cultivated person allows others to influence their actions and intentions, but without resentment, a sense of submission or any kind of self-deception.²⁰⁵ Giving way or modestly declining thus become idealised forms of conduct.²⁰⁶

That such dispositions are constitutive of human excellence can be seen by looking at Confucius in action. For him, these virtues constitute a method for dealing with other people. We find in 1.10 that Confucius employs what is described as a ‘distinctive method’ to gain insight when interacting with others in a formal or political context. His method is not focused on discourse or argument but, strikingly, is constituted by interpersonal virtues of warmth (溫 *wen*), decency (良 *liang*), deference (恭 *gong*), simplicity (儉 *jian*), and yielding (讓 *rang*).

The ideal of excellence in the personal realm has another aspect: a certain sensitivity and disposition to be moved affectively by others. Perhaps the most prominent illustration of this is the disposition to feel awe or reverence towards particular others (*jing* 敬).²⁰⁷ Such reverence, along with generosity and a sense of appropriateness, characterises the refined person (5.16). This reverential attitude towards others is clearly expressed by Confucius’ disciple Zengzi on his deathbed, who quotes Song 195: ‘Fearful,

described in 17.13; similarly, in pursuing a path of self-cultivation one should not mind too much how others see oneself (e.g., 1.16).

²⁰⁴ The theme of refraining from competition (*zheng* 爭) conveys a similar ideal (3.7, 15.22)

²⁰⁵ The importance of *rang* (讓) is also stressed in 1.10, 3.7 and 4.13. As in the case of deference, yielding has limits: integrity and self-determination balance the force of this ideal: ‘in aiming to become *ren* (仁), do not yield (in this ambition) even to your teacher’ (當仁，不讓於師 15.36).

²⁰⁶ Reference to other early texts can help clarify the practical implications of *rang*. For example, the *Guoyu* text understands it as the act of ‘promoting those of good character’ 讓，推賢也 (*Guoyu*, Jinyu 晉語 section), while the *Book of Rites* glosses it as a behaviour that ‘illuminates’ or ‘brings to life’ ritual (退讓以明禮. *Liji*, Quli 曲禮 section).

²⁰⁷ As with the case of deference (*gong* 恭), we can get some sense of the emotional and dispositional content of *jing* by considering its etymological roots: these include an experience similar to that of surprise (*jing* 驚), and a sense of earnest comparable to the making of oaths or the taking of vows (*jing* 警).

fearful! Trembling, trembling! As if peering over a deep abyss, as if walking across thin ice' (8.3).²⁰⁸

That this sensitivity is important can be seen by looking at Confucius, whose sensibilities can reasonably be assumed to constitute an ideal person. Confucius is often understood as being authoritative and he is certainly that. He possesses practical 'know how'. But the text also implies that part of his authority or admirable character comes from his susceptibility to be moved, one might even say disturbed, by the particular features of those he encounters. The text portrays at some length the behavioural changes that arise in a sage-like figure (Confucius) in various kinds of interpersonal encounters. These changes include quickening one's footsteps on encountering the blind, or losing appetite on encountering mourners (e.g., 7.9, 10.25), changes in posture in the presence of esteemed figures (10.3), or when regarding ancestors, or being speechless when in one's own village (10.1). Given how banal these changes might appear, the inclusion of these passages in the text is testimony to the value of such sensitivity to the fortunes and opinions of those one encounters.²⁰⁹

The effects of these sensibilities and virtues on character might be summarised as follows. They enable conduct to be altered in subtle ways, ways which do not (contra other ethical visions) involve a conscious deliberative decision. They thus enable the *junzi* to benefit from the sustained goodwill of others, and ensure more charitable interpretations of their conduct. Of course, the danger of mere sycophancy arises and there must be limits to such accommodation. However, the *Analects* appears to believe that real-time human practical interaction is sufficiently chaotic, and lacking in unproblematic criteria for determining what is right or fair, that such a disposition is an admirable trait.

The engaging and maintaining of personal relationships thus has some kind of independent ethical value. This is a recognition that it is sometimes preferable to suspend or defer the act of individual critical reflection and the judgment of others for the sake of

²⁰⁸ That the awe-struck attitude mentioned here is directed towards other people is explained by the appearance of the same ode in the *Xiaojing* (Chapter 3), as a description of how the hereditary lords were to instantiate family reverence. Zengzi is also traditionally recognised as the author of the *Xiaojing*.

²⁰⁹ The capacity to feel shame (耻 *chi*) is another important aspect of this personal sensitivity. The text suggests that sensitivity to what others think of oneself is integral to ethical conduct. An absence of shame is frequently associated with inappropriate behaviour, such as glib talking (5.25).

maintaining personal bonds. The various virtues and sensibilities constitute ‘fine-tuned’ or ‘super-tuned’ modes of conduct which – given that basic standards of reasonable conduct are met, as they usually are in most situations – allow the *junzi* to extract something extra from the situation: a quality of interaction that would otherwise elude participants. This is a form of harmony, and leads to the final point about the ideal Confucian character.

6.3 Ethical excellence as a personal sensibility

There is one final way of engaging in personal relationships that is constitutive of a cultivated Confucian: the creation of harmony. Engaging in personal relationships means observing and responding to unscripted events and particular people in a timely fashion, which is itself a kind of ideal form of conduct. This requires the development of a certain personal sensibility, described in the text as Confucius’ fascination with the creation of joyful shared emotional experiences and activities (*le* 樂); which are often of a musical kind (*yue* 樂), and lead to the creation of harmony (*he* 和). In 7.32, for example, Confucius the moral exemplar is moved to join in with sung harmonies; while in 11.26 we find Confucius agreeing with Zengxi’s ideal of what a perfect day consists in – it is one structured by the shared emotional experiences of friends:

[I]n the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain, and then to return home singing.

What we see in the text, then, is that the ideal person is one capable of appropriate and immediate responses to events, responses that often arise without reference to reflective deliberation.²¹⁰ And this form of responsiveness is also required for close personal relationships. These are responses to another as a set of particular qualities and features, producing actions that emerge without conscious reference to moral standards, yet which, in general, are both ethical and constitutive of a fulfilling life. Without this capacity for intuitive and affective response intimate personal relationships such as those of husband and wife or friendship would not be possible. Such spontaneous yet appropriate response within relationships is, I suggest, partly constitutive of the meanings

²¹⁰ Confucius autobiographical account of self-cultivation is a widely-known example of this (2.4). See also 15.5, where Confucius capacity for political leadership is described in terms of effortless action (*wuwei* 無爲).

of *ren* (仁). Becoming *ren* in the more general sense of being an outstanding individual, a pillar of the community, is thus closely linked to developing the responsiveness required for many close personal relationships.

7. Problems with an ethical vision based on personal relationships

One generic component of ethical conduct has not yet been discussed. This is motivation and how to identify ethical motivation. The reason for this omission is simple. While some aspects of ethical conduct are not easily recast in terms of the features and practices of personal relationships, this problem does not apply to motivation. There is a conception of ethical motivation ready to hand and integral to many personal relationships. There is a question of whether this is a single form of motivation or multiple but, setting that question aside, this motivation is usually described as ‘goodwill’, ‘benevolence’ or the non-instrumental desire for the other person’s happiness, and a willingness to act to bring this about. This has long been recognised as an ethical motivation. On the subject of ethical motivation, the case for thinking of ethical conduct in terms of an ethics of personal relationships thus plays its strongest hand. In contrast, it is a burden for ethical theories that understand ethical conduct as adherence to rules or principles to explain how or why anyone would want to accord with them. It is here that arguments such as those that attempt to equate rationality and ethical conduct must be made; or if a direct link fails, then a Rawls-esque appeal to something like a faculty of reasonableness must be made.

At the same time, an attempt to recast ethical conduct as conduct pertaining to personal relationships is not without its difficulties. These also apply to the Confucian-inspired account of personal relationships I have attempted here. Three in particular are worth mentioning.

First, there are persistent worries about the family as a site of unjust or unethical practices. It remains debatable whether the Confucian account of personal relationships relies too heavily on an idealised account of the family that rarely obtains in practice. As ways of talking and thinking about the family develop, so more sophisticated critiques have emerged. I will not attempt to settle this question here. Rather, by way of a partial response, what I say in the next chapter about the form or structure of a life that makes an

ethics of personal relationships appear plausible does not involve any special emphasis on the role of the family (although it does not demean it either). I hope therefore that what I have to say can be judged independently of this ongoing debate about the ethical status of the family.

A second and perhaps more pressing concern about the account under development is that it includes only a very limited conception of the public realm. Justice has been claimed as the first virtue of institutions (Rawls, 1971) and, on this view, a conception of ethical living must include an account of how to order the social institutions that order private lives. So far, it is unclear whether an ethics of personal relationships can really escape from a limited private realm and perform such a task. I will address this question in the final chapter.

Finally, one might object to an attempt to build an ethics of personal relationships by claiming that it does little to address the question of how to treat distant strangers. Arguably, treatment of one's nearest and dearest is the area of life about which we least need ethical guidance. There is a common sense view that those close to us are already treated decently, and that the real task of ethics is to get people to treat strangers and distant others better. If this is so, then an ethics of personal relationships seems to miss the point of ethics as a reflective discipline. It attempts to motivate us to do what we were already quite happy doing, and neglects the project of extending our concern and rethinking our relation with humanity as some kind of whole or at least as many vaguely-recognised but never-the-less real individuals. To some extent, the discussion of obligation above serves as a response to this claim, and I develop this further in the next chapter. But my response to this is not only denial of the claim; rather we should realise that this is only one master narrative or guiding heuristic of what ethical conduct is, and that there can be others. Within these others conception of practical life, understanding ethical conduct in terms of personal relationships might after all prove to be a kind of meaningful palliative.

Let us now turn to the second of the projects that was outlined at the start of this chapter: an account of human experience and practical life that makes an ethics of personal relationships practically important.

Chapter IV. Personal Relationships as an ethical practical standpoint

The Master said: 'Focusing the familiar affairs of the day is a task of the highest order. It is rare among the common people to be able to sustain it for long.'
- *Zhongyong (The Doctrine of the Mean)*, section 3.

1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I explored how the basic categories and experiences of ethical life, such as obligation, justification, and normative standards can derive their content from the features and practices of personal relationships. The *Analects* provides such a conception of ethical conduct, and a corresponding ethical subject (person). We noted, however, some ethically-worrying features of the *Analects'* account.

We must now address two related issues. First, we must make clearer what is distinctive and valuable about this alternative conception of ethical conduct. These basic ethical categories and experiences might be substantiated in several distinct ways, and so we must show why drawing on the practices of personal relationships leads to an appealing picture of ethical life. We have shown, through the early Confucians, such an approach is possible; we must now make it persuasive. But we must do this while avoiding the objections directed at the classical Confucian account. We must build on what is valuable in that early vision while discarding what is anachronistic, oppressive or otherwise inimical to an ethical life.

We can do this by locating the alternative ethical subject, immersed in personal relationships, within a broader explanatory framework that makes its worth clear. This involves a story about what counts as the most basic kind of human practical activity, and which provides a ground for ethical evaluations of human action. Articulating such a framework is the task of this chapter. Although, the framework offered is a creative interpretation of early Confucian thought, it can be assessed independently of that textual tradition, as an interesting attempt to address the meta-ethical question of what counts as ethical conduct. In the first section I outline the idea of a practical standpoint; I then consider its relation to Confucian thought, before considering objections in the final section.

2. Personal relationships as a practical standpoint, based on aesthetic flourishing

2.1 Finding a practical foundation for ethical conduct: some familiar accounts

Whatever else it involves, ethics is about directing practical activity. Both as practice and as theory it is about getting us to stop, start, continue or change what we do. This is true even where the link is indirect - as it is with discussions of character or habit formation, which matter in so far as they affect action. What 'ethics' is thus partly depends on how practical activity is understood or theorised. Ethical *theories* typically begin by taking some conception of human practical life as foundational, and then building an account of ideal or ethical conduct and an ethical subject around it. Call this idealised conception of basic practical activity a *practical standpoint*.²¹¹

Several distinct *practical standpoints* might be identified; and each yields a different account of what kind of activity matters most – a practical or ethical *ideal* – and of what counts as an ethical subject (person). Describing some familiar practical standpoints will prepare the ground for a description of an alternative standpoint. It should be noted here, however, that my primary aim in this chapter is not to argue that one practical standpoint is 'better' than another. It is descriptive: to articulate a practical standpoint that gives us a reason to accept that the generic ethical categories might be informed by the features of personal relationships.²¹²

We discussed one foundational practical standpoint in chapter II. This approaches action by taking a God's eye view, beginning from the standpoint of a universal

²¹¹ An ethical theory – an abstract account of how people should conduct themselves – could be thoroughly pragmatic, asserting the contingency and uniqueness of each situation or action. Such a theory might thus deny the need for a foundational practical standpoint. But not only would it be a very simple theory; it might also be self-defeating, in so far as the value of ethical theorising partly consists in helping us think more clearly or in a novel and helpful way about conduct, in the hope of making it better.

²¹² Allowing talk of multiple distinct practical standpoints, with each giving shape to generic ethical categories raises the possibility of a novel form of ethical dilemma. This is not the practical dilemma of being faced with two incommensurable choices, as with Sartre's young man choosing between a sick mother and fighting for the free French army (Satre, 2004, p. 350-2). It is the dilemma of choosing which practical standpoint to adopt, given that this determines which actions then appear ethical (although different standpoints could yield the same normative conclusions). Though this implies a form of ethical relativism, it is not, I believe, a pernicious form. It does entail that there is no single a-historical and a-cultural moral standard or standpoint that delimits right conduct. But it is consistent with the non-relativist dictum that the same description of a situation entails the same normative judgment.

community of moral beings of equal worth.²¹³ On this account, the practical or ethical ideal is action that reflects or is consistent with the interests of this community. This standpoint also determines the content of the basic ethical categories. An ethical subject is one obliged to adopt such an impartial judgmental standpoint whenever needed; practical reasoning primarily involves the identification of compatible principles or actions, as well as deducing which particular acts accord with the relevant principles; and which acts reflecting the community's interest are justified. Ethical motivation is the motivation to adopt such an approach, disciplining or structuring the will accordingly, and possibly motivated by specific attitudes such as awe or reverence for law or respect for persons.

Some problems with this account from the perspective of the filial subject were discussed in chapter II, and I will not reprise them here. There is, however, one related issue that is worth discussing, because it sets the scene for the alternative practical standpoint, presented below, and into which an ethics of personal relationships fits. This concerns the question of *motivation*. This is the challenge to explain why a person should care to ground their practical activity in such a standpoint. This is important if, pace Kant, the standpoint is no longer represented as a distinct form of practical rationality, one expressive of human freedom. The authority of the standpoint is challenged by the claim that a person can act rationally without universalising conduct and also without acting ethically (by, for example, subtly manipulating others to amass personal wealth).

The problematic relation of this practical standpoint to human motivation was well-described by Bernard Williams. To briefly recap the discussion of chapter I, Williams argued that any worthwhile human life has a distinctive character: it is structured around certain personal 'projects' (1976, p. 209), which imbue that life with its basic motivational force. Taking up the practical standpoint of impartiality threatens to undermine such projects and motivations, however, by introducing an external practical demand on action and disrupting the projects that motivate a person. But such a demand

²¹³ This is typically understood as all humans or all sentient beings – all those who share some generic characteristic or capacity. However, in some forms of consequentialism what is 'viewed' are not beings or people but of objective values, taken to exist independent of any particular viewpoint or observer. See Philip Pettit's (1997) account of 'global consequentialism' for such a view. Regardless, the basic practical standpoint – of disinterested detachment and impartiality – remains the same.

is self-defeating. It undermines the motivational force needed for any action, including compliance with what is required by the universal community.

Williams' argument raises doubts about whether a person can ever fully or in all cases embrace the universalist practical standpoint, thus challenging its claim to be the only or most basic practical standpoint for ethical conduct. The empirical conditions of human life and motivation place limits on any idealised conception of practical activity, while the universal standpoint is insensitive to existing motivational structures that partly constitute a worthwhile individual life. This undermines its claim to be the determining ground of what counts as ethical conduct.

Williams can be understood as offering a second practical standpoint, based around the notions of character and projects. This picture of basic human practical activity is a familiar liberal individual one, and his notion of character seems to owe much to JS Mill in *On Liberty*:

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed to it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing...A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature...is said to have a character (Chapter 3, paragraph 4, 1956)

This practical standpoint can be understood as an individual life existing over time, featuring a subject with a determinate character and, typically, a conception of its own good that includes various goals and ends that the subject strives to realise. One practical or ethical ideal derived from this picture is the successful management of such a life, and the full expression of its inherent character. Regarding its construction of an ethical subject, obligation is expressed primarily as a commitment to integrity, self-expression or self-fulfilment (or perhaps even just happiness); practical reasoning is of the prudential means-end variety; and justifications reference the value of the subject's practical goals or projects to him or herself.

It might be objected that this practical standpoint cannot be the basis for ethical conduct. Its narrow focus on the subject's own flourishing and the potential for indifference to fellow humans might, for example, be contrasted with ethical conduct that includes broad concern for fellow humans. It is possible, however, that the projects defining 'personal character' could be 'ethical' projects such as acting benevolently, considering others when acting, helping the poor and so on. But even if this were not the

case, ethical egoism is itself an ethical theory, and as Bishop Butler noted, society might function best when each pursues his or her own interests.²¹⁴ Further, even if such narrow self-interest could not yield an ethical vision, there is another practical or ethical ideal that could be derived from the same standpoint. This is the fundamental ethical task of adjudicating fairly between such self-interested and autonomous agents, typically by agreeing to a common set of rules. The ‘ethical’ thus becomes the setting up of constraints on such personal projects while still recognising them as basic.

Williams’ account is problematic in another way, however. Just as he criticised modern moral theorists’ neglect of motivation, so his own account appears too crude. It exaggerates the extent to which the motivation to act is dependent upon the existence of personal projects. It exaggerates the importance of a practical standpoint defined in terms of ground projects. It is not only a person’s character with fixed interests and pre-existing desires for more or less specifiable ends that ‘propel him forward...[and] give him, in a certain sense, a reason for living his life’ (1976, p.211). People also find motivation to act when no substantial sense of ‘project’ or practical goal is at stake. Often motivation arises from within the situation in which one finds oneself, where such motivations did not exist prior to the situation arising. Such motivations do not come from practical goals or projects that existed prior to the situation. They can arise without any detectable link with, or structuring by, character.

One example of such a motivation is sympathy. One feels the pain of someone one encounters in the situation before one, but the motivation to respond has no obvious connection with one’s own projects (or with an impartial standpoint). Similarly, actions are sometimes done for the sake of another person’s good (without sympathy), where these cannot be rationalised in terms of one’s own well-being or practical projects.²¹⁵ In

²¹⁴ Further, as Williams himself points out, whether or not it is ethical to pursue private own projects – to the exclusion of large swathes of common-sense beliefs about decent or ethical conduct – is a complex question. Much depends on whether or not individuals succeed. If the would-be Gauguin succeeds and turns out to be a great painter, his conduct and work might be celebrated and become a genuine public good. But this is typically dependent on many factors outside a person’s control – it is a matter of moral luck; conventional practices of (ethical) praise and blame might themselves be inconsistent.

²¹⁵ Williams’ use of the term ‘character’ and ‘projects’ are productively vague, and are thus open to interpretation. For example, if ‘project’ is understood as specific practical goals, such as material wealth or becoming a doctor, then it is easy to see how projects structure action and motivation, and how this picture of action fails to capture many everyday, non-instrumental motivations to act. If, however, ‘character’

general, in many everyday situations, motivations to act arise that bear no obvious relation to a description of character (they can be quite out of character), which might be as simple as a sudden desire to listen to a favourite song.

In summary, the two practical standpoints both stand in problematic relation to human motivation. One is accused of failing to accommodate de facto and particularistic human motivations, the other exaggerates the extent to which these are derived from and fixed by character and projects. This is an appropriate point to turn to an alternative practical standpoint, one that both makes sense of an ethics of personal relationships and also approaches ethical motivation in a different way. This focuses not on a universal moral community or an individual life existing over time, but on another kind of 'arena'. This is the local social world around the human subject. On this account, the motivation of the ethical subject is primarily attached not to a theoretical universal community or the fixed dispositions of an enduring character, but coheres around the *quality of interaction* achieved *through interaction with others* in a concrete social context.

2.2. An alternative practical standpoint: a life constituted by personal interactions

Most people who are not philosophers, and even some who are, live lives in which the majority of time is spent interacting with people they know or could easily get to know. According to this practical standpoint, a single human life is constituted by innumerable episodes of interpersonal or person-to-person interaction; and a day typically consists of a series of rolling, discrete episodes of interaction with those with whom a person is familiar to some degree.²¹⁶ Such encounters include the interactions of close personal relationships such as family and close friends, and the majority of such interactions might involve them. But there are also interactions between the less intimate, such as colleagues, as well as face-to-face or real-time interactions between those who are initially unfamiliar. Let us call these interactions *serial personal interactions*.

refers to certain dispositions to act (which the agent herself might often be unaware of), then the picture is less clear. The latter account is compatible with the account presented below.

²¹⁶ The boundary between stranger and familiar other is not easily drawn analytically; it is difficult to determine when interacting with a stranger becomes a case of acting with a familiar other. Nor are such clear distinctions needed. What matters is that interaction with strangers occupies a relatively small portion of daily life; most of the people who are strangers to us remain so.

Such interactions can take many forms, too numerous to list exhaustively, but include: dealing with colleagues and customers at work, meeting neighbours on the street, attending a dinner party, sharing activities with friends and taking part in social ceremonies such as weddings. Their length and complexity vary, from brief greetings and salutations to extended dialogues and shared activities. It is not necessary here to precisely define an interaction, if that is even possible, although it is important that they include some opportunity for perceiving and acting on personal particulars. Presumably, some personal interactions are so brief, cursory or thoughtless, or take place under duress or in a state of distraction, that they cannot be called personal interactions. Buying a train ticket from a station employee while rushing to catch a train is one such example.

Such a practical standpoint might be grounded in an appeal to human nature. Aristotle's phrase 'Man is a social animal' can be interpreted in many ways but it might be regarded as a pithy expression of this practical viewpoint. Humans might be such that most *need* such interactions, in the sense that they are drawn to personal interaction, often in spite of themselves and their original intentions, which are often deferred for the sake of an interaction. At the very least, such personal interactions seem practically necessary for many activities, including education, and life without them might be drab. But biological or naturalistic theorising is not my concern here. What matters here is that something like this series of socially located, embodied, contextualised interactions is a reasonably accurate description of sufficient numbers of lives, such that it yields a foundational practical standpoint, and thus a practical or ethical ideal. One can approach the question of how to act or how to live from the starting point of personal interactions.

It might be objected that this practical standpoint has little to do with ethics or is only tangentially related at best. Not all human lives feature regular person-to-person interaction: some people live alone or in relative isolation. So, if ethics must be universal in scope then this standpoint cannot be a foundation for ethical conduct.

This objection begs the question, however. It is not clear that any account of basic practical activity must apply to all people in order for it to ground a conception of ethical conduct. This is true even of the universal approach, when it is grounded on respect for rational agency and yet must accommodate humans who are not fully rational, in the case of the very young or senile. Similarly, while it might be ethically important to view all

people as equal or alike, the basis for such claims is far from clear. All ethical theorising is, in part, an incomplete representation of human conduct, intended to aid in rethinking and improving it, and the heuristic standpoint of personal interactions serves this purpose.

Another consideration in favour of this practical standpoint is its sensitivity to social and historical change, and the impact of the latter on a conception of the ethical. This account reflects the greatly increased opportunities for social and personal interaction that characterise contemporary life for many, partly as a result of technological development and the rise of social media. A social life featuring increased frequency of interaction with an extended web of people contrasts starkly with a private life focused on just a few relationships and projects. This invites reflection on what conceptions of ethical conduct might be derived from such a practical standpoint of interactions.

2.3 How does the standpoint of personal interaction relate to ethics?

Given that approaching ethical conduct from such a practical standpoint is reasonable, what sort of practical or ethical ideals derive from it? And how do these confirm the value of deriving the basic categories of ethics from personal relationships? The simplest ideal derived from person-to-person interactions starts with recognition that they can go well or badly, and it is reasonable to aim at their going well. Interactions can, for example, generate dislike, discomfort, anger or even hostility; conversely, they can be rewarding in multiple ways. Consider two possible ways this ideal might be further substantiated. They show that not only *can* this practical standpoint of person-to-person interaction yield an ethical ideal, but it *already does*.

An account of everyday personal interaction lies at the root of one of the oldest and most familiar conceptions of ethics available: the normative demand to observe custom and social convention in the interactions of human society. The word ‘morality’ derives from the Latin word *moralis*, which referred to the social mores that govern the social life of a community.

Upholding customary conventions is one way to ensure that person-to-person interactions go well rather than badly. However, although social convention is a constitutive part of the ethical ideal I wish to develop here it is not the full story. Ensuring

interactions go as well as possible is a more complex and demanding process than merely abiding by customary requirements and expectations. Custom, in the form of politeness for example, might prevent an interaction going badly without ensuring it goes well.

Another ideal drawn from this practical standpoint is potentially more demanding than customary conduct but offers the prospect of a more ethical interaction, in so far as altruism is an ethical ideal. This complex idea covers many approaches to conduct,²¹⁷ but one particular feature is common to many versions of an ethic of care: becoming engrossed in and meeting the needs of the person cared for. Nel Noddings (2002, p. 17) offers a helpful illustration of such caring:

Ms. A, a math teacher, stands beside student B as he struggles to solve an equation. Ms. A can almost feel the pencil in her own hand. She anticipates what B will write, and she pushes mentally toward the next step, making marks and erasures mentally. Her moves are directed by this. She may intervene occasionally but only to keep his plan alive, not to substitute her own. She introduces her own plan of attack only if his own plan fails entirely and he asks, 'What should I do?'

As this passage makes clear, one crucial feature of a caring interaction is motivational displacement: A is motivated to take the ends or needs of B as his or her practical goal and act accordingly. Based partly on such motivational displacement, this account shows one way in which serial personal interactions could be made to go well. The benefit to the cared-for is clear. But the carer might also benefit – if, for example, the acknowledgement of care from the cared-for to the carer is understood not simply epistemologically, as a comment on the appropriateness of the caring act, but as a contribution to the carer's well-being or satisfaction.

Care is not the ideal I wish to derive from the practical standpoint of personal interaction, however, although it shares some insights with the care ethics perspective. Firstly, not all daily personal interactions are orientated around the need of an interlocutor and thus the need to care for him or her. Some interactions take place between relatively self-sufficient persons who might, for example, wish merely to share in an activity or conversation. Similarly, some interactions are valuable not as a response to need but because they generate new and unexpected interests and experiences – as when a co-worker offers an unexpected but welcome invitation to dinner, or an engaging conversation takes an amusing turn. Accordingly, the ideal of a motivational

²¹⁷ A thorough overview of recent developments in care ethics is provided by Virginia Held, in the first chapter of her book *The Ethics of Care* (2006); see also Andrea Maihofer (2000).

displacement, adopting the others good as one's own interest, seems to apply only in some interactions but not all.

Further, the ideal of motivational displacement seems almost too demanding an ideal of how motivational disposition should be structured. As a practical ideal applicable to all of the multiple personal interactions that make up a person's day, it threatens to be an exhausting mode of activity; not least because in group interactions the attempt to respond to each party might lead to confusion or practical conflicts. It might also be too optimistic to hope that a person's prevailing motivation will somehow leap across a personal divide and take the form of, or mirror, the other's motives.

This worry over demandingness could be assuaged if the set of people to be cared for are thought of as limited – to a circle of family and friends, for example.²¹⁸ However, such a restriction of care leads to two problems. Firstly, in effect this is an appeal to a different practical standpoint from the one discussed here: a standpoint of non-instrumental concern for a limited set of beloved objects, which is distinct from personal interactions. Secondly, when the objects of concern are limited in this way, the partial nature of such care, admirable altruism aside, does not obviously qualify as an ethical ideal.²¹⁹ I return to this ethical problem in section three below. Whether other versions of care ethics might avoid this concern over the motivational displacement implicit in Noddings' account is unclear, but here I will be concerned with a different ethical ideal and motivational disposition derived from the standpoint of personal interaction.

2.4 An ethical ideal in serial personal interactions: attaining a quality of interaction as the basis for a flourishing life.

In what ways can interactions go well, other than through the observance of customary standards or by being caring encounters? What other practical ethical ideal can be derived from the practical standpoint of personal interaction? I suggest that approaching action from the practical standpoint of social interactions gives rise to a

²¹⁸ Such an approach also fits a reading of the early Confucians as advocating concern with one's family but not much beyond that. As will be clear from what follows, this is too narrow and crude an appraisal of the Confucians ethical vision.

²¹⁹ See Frankfurt (2004) for an account of such care, which he calls 'love'. He defines this as a "disinterested concern for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it." (2004, p. 42). Frankfurt does not claim it as an ethical position, but merely as a non-ethical normative force; 'love' is the inevitable form that the human will takes and can conflict with an ethical standpoint.

further ethical ideal: that as many of these episodic and self-contained interactions go as well as possible, that they *attain a certain level or quality of interaction*.

What does ‘quality of interaction’ mean? I am not attempting to posit or describe some obscure metaphysical properties, readily isolated and analysed. Rather I seek to offer a social description, which people can recognise in their own interactions. Some personal interactions go well, and lead participants to feeling content or ‘energised’ (to use Murdoch’s verb). Some do not go well and are completed through gritted teeth; when such interactions are finally over the participants find themselves relaxing, relieved that they are over. Some simple examples of attaining such quality in interaction include: the experience of giving and receiving a gift; sharing a funny joke, and a social event like a dinner party, where each participant contributes and coordinates their action to achieve an overall effect.

Another example might be neighbours or associates working together to construct a house.²²⁰ The work could be dull and monotonous; but the conversation, the practical joking and, perhaps, the philosophical conversations elevate the experience, without neglecting the basic practical task. It is simply that the participants find a better way to perform the task, one that arouses affective experiences of a pleasing kind; and the locus or origin of this is person-to-person interaction. The crucial point is that many of the episodic person-to-person interactions that make up a human life can be conducted more skilfully and to greater effect than is often the case.

Clearly, a significant indicator that such person-to-person interactions have gone well is the right kind of affective experience, generated through seemingly mundane actions that are applied fittingly or with skill. It is also important from an ethical viewpoint that such affective experiences are shared and not experienced only by one party in interactions. They might be shared either as the same positive affective experience towards the interaction, or as distinct but mutually agreeable and commensurate affective experiences. This requirement of creating shared experiences is hugely important, constituting a significant ethical burden or task. It rules out a shallow hedonism and introduces a substantive method for achieving such experiential and

²²⁰ This example is drawn from Andrew Kipnis’ discussion of *guanxi*, (1997, introduction) discussed in the next chapter.

affective outcomes. It would be a Herculean task, and also an unnecessary one, to list all the positive affective experiences generated when person-to-person interaction is conducted skilfully, in the right way. But it is reasonable to include experiences such as delight, humour, reverence, and respect.

It is also important to note that this practical ideal of creating the right kinds of interactions within personal relationship is only loosely correlated with other ways of categorising or understanding personal relationships. What is nominally the same category of relationship can feature very different experiences of social interactions. For example, there are many different ways in which the relationship of marriage can be conducted. One can love someone but not particularly enjoy spending time with them, as when a wife has affection for her husband, finds advantage in living with him, and enjoys shared activity, but finds their conversation or daily interactions laborious or uninspiring. As Iris Murdoch (1971) notes, although love is superficially a general ideal or generic term, it is understood only idiosyncratically and over time. Here I seek to describe only one of several features of personal relationships, one whose fit with other descriptions is not neat but which is of particular ethical significance.

2.5 An ethical ideal in serial personal interactions: changing interactions into events

In *Experience and Nature*, John Dewey reminds us that delight and other celebratory and affective experiences are powerful motivating forces in human conduct (and, as we will see, central to the Confucian conception of acting well). He writes:

Human experience...has for one of its most striking features preoccupation with direct enjoyment, feasting and festivities; ornamentation, dance, song, dramatic pantomime, telling yarns and enacting stories...This trait of experience has hardly received the attention from philosophers that it demands. Even philosophers who have conceived that pleasure is the sole motive of man and the attainment of happiness his whole aim, have given a curiously sober, drab account of the working of pleasure and the search for happiness...The history of man shows, however, that man takes his enjoyment neat, and at as short range as possible. (1958, pp. 78)

Let us take up Dewey's challenge to describe this 'trait of experience', and locate this species of motivation within the framework of personal interactions. Attaining a quality of interaction now has a more explicit form – the *quality of experience* created in interaction. At their most basic, such experiences might be described in terms of affective experiences such as delight or joy, reverence, finding something funny, or experiencing a

sense of ease or satisfaction through the interaction. Such experiences have a sufficiently distinctive character that they can provide an interaction with a *telos* – an end at which they aim – which operates alongside the more concrete or instrumental goals of an interaction, and also when such purposefulness is not present. The attainment of such a quality in interaction might be described as the creation of an *event*. This practical ethical ideal might thus be summarised as the aim of turning as many interactions as possible into events. Given the emphasis on qualitative experience, and the creation of memorable and moving events, this might be thought of as an aesthetic notion of flourishing. These events are self-contained: they don't lead anywhere or have any obvious broader social consequences beyond the lives of the participants. They are events-in-themselves. Further, this kind of interaction, the aim of creating events, partly distinguishes a human relationship as a personal relationship. Viewed collectively, such events constitute a flourishing life. Further, it is this affective quality of personal interaction, and not principles, types of action or even character, which form the basic object of ethical evaluation, serving as the assessee of moral appraisal.

Perhaps the simplest example of an attempt to transform an interaction into an event is the use of greetings to contextualise interactions, such as handshakes or bows. These call forth appropriate attitudes in participants, which can then influence the course of the interaction; or the smooth execution of these forms can itself be a complete event that bestows on participants a sense of satisfaction. The use of conventional practices might not by itself usually be sufficient to distinguish an interaction from the mere observance of convention; but it is a contributory element, especially when the effort of following laborious conventions expresses an interpersonal attitude such as respect, with its concomitant affective response. Consider another example. A person might have employment that requires professional interaction with various people. The requisite tasks might be performed correctly and appropriately, proceeding smoothly and without incident. Such interactions might, however, be uneventful, lacking any affective experiences, and performed for expedient motives such as earning money. But these same interactions can be conceived of and conducted differently, as something eagerly anticipated, and yielding affective responses such as a sense of satisfaction. This means conducting them from a different standpoint; without neglecting the underlying practical

tasks, these can be performed in a way that makes them moving or memorable, or interwoven with other activities, games or conversations that bestow an affective dimension on the interactions.²²¹ The style in which actions are done, what is said or the words chosen all might elevate what would otherwise be a mundane interaction.

This ethical ideal of creating events might be compared to Maria Lugones' (1987) account of 'world-travelling' and 'playfulness'. As a member of a non-dominant social and racial group, Lugones describes her need to imaginatively enter multiple other social and personal 'worlds' in order to comply with, for example, the demands of 'White/Anglo organisation of life in the US' (1987, p.3).²²² In the various social situations in which she finds herself, she must 'reach out' to the people encountered there – often from different cultural backgrounds – and comprehend how best to act.

Lugones understands a world in something like the terms of what I am calling an interaction. It might 'be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people,' (p. 10) which might require that one be 'a different person in different worlds' (p.11). On Lugones' account, what is called for is a 'loving playfulness' where one responds to the situation confronting one by imaginatively interacting with the people therein. This playful attitude means that 'we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves' (p.16); and this reflects a fear of 'ending up a serious human being, someone with no multi-dimensionality, with no fun in life, someone who is just someone who has had the fun constructed out of her' (p.15). That the situation can take priority over one's sense of one's own projects or goals, and that interactions can turn into forms of play with rules and affective rewards internal to them, are important elements in the view under development here. Lugones also offers a list of attitudes or capacities that also contribute to the creation of events, which might be added to the above account of practices and sensibilities. These include: a playful attitude,

²²¹ On a similar point, Dewey writes, 'Useful labour is, whenever possible, transformed by ceremonial and ritual accompaniments, [and] subordinated to art that yields immediate enjoyment (1958, p. 79). I address the worry that this account is socially naïve below, and in the next chapter.

²²² Drawing on a progressive feminist writer to develop an ethical position that appears circumspect and even conservative might seem ironic. But as Vrinda Dalmiya notes (2009, p. 192), Iris Young confesses to being a *bandita*, drawing on male thinkers nominally opposed to her views, such as Kant, to enrich her own work. Drawing on a feminist writer to develop a view that appears to preserve the status quo is a similar strategy.

openness to surprises, no concern about competence, openness to being a fool, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity in personal interactions.

Lugones also shows why character is not obviously a higher ideal than the kind of situational responses required by events. Both world-travelling and the pursuit of events 'justify' malleability in personal responses by linking it with the reward of a quality of interaction; and there is some tension here with the ideal of a fixed and stable character that brings interests or expectations into interactions, thereby limiting the scope for response therein.²²³ Lugones' account of persistent world-travelling reminds us that it is often not possible in such dynamic contexts and through brief interactions to establish a person's character. Further, recognition of such pluralistic or multi-cultural interactions with people from varied backgrounds makes apparent the difficulty of describing any ideal type of character and the contested nature of such claims.

Lugones also helps defend the ideal of event creation in other ways. Firstly, it is significant that she writes as a person who does not occupy a socially privileged position. This goes some way to addressing the charge that the ideal is socially naïve, failing to promote social change. It does this in two ways. While social and institutional change are important practical goals, they are often achieved slowly and over a long period of time; in the meantime, however, an individual life faces imperfect institutions and distributions of goods and must attain flourishing as best it can. Under such circumstances, world-travelling and the creation of events are pragmatic and expedient responses, but not less valuable for that. Secondly, the ethical ideal of creating events no longer appears as escapism in the face of social powerlessness, but as awareness of the diversity of people encountered in contemporary life, and the challenge of finding a basis for familiarity with them.

²²³ Whether the notion of character is empirically grounded or whether the situation is primary in determining a person's response is subject to much debate. For details of the debate, see Gilbert Harman (1999). For a defence of the notion of character, see Maria Homiak (1997); one classic experiment that purports to demonstrate the priority of situation is Isen and Levin (1972).

2.6 A practical method for changing person-to-person interactions into events

Treating the ideal form of practical activity as arising through person-to-person interactions gives rise to an account of flourishing, and a method for achieving this. Simply put, a life in which many or most of its constitutive personal interactions go well is a flourishing life. This conception of flourishing can be illustrated by contrasting it with other possible forms of flourishing. For example, it is not based primarily on the acquisition of a fixed, stable and virtuous character, identified behind the myriad interactions, and understood as the ground or cause of virtuous deeds. Of course, this account of flourishing is not entirely detached from character either, since any account of acting well can be linked to traits and capacities that bring this about. These include those presented in the previous chapter, which are explicitly interpersonal in character: deference, yielding, carefulness in speech, trustworthiness and so on. What is most important here, however, is that a stable character that exists, in some sense, prior to and ‘behind’ the interactions is not the primary determinant of ethical conduct.

Nor does this account of flourishing consist in the realisation of a preconceived plan or blueprint of a rewarding life or lifestyle, which an individual works purposively over time to realise or sustain. While acknowledging that such ‘blueprints’ have a role to play in other conceptions of ethical conduct – for example, a Rawlsian liberal picture of contractual human association – the motivations and pressures on action they create can contrast with or, *in extremis*, conflict with the personal interaction standpoint. Simply put, the ethical subject of personal interactions can be distracted by concerns existing prior to the interaction, which persist during the interaction and prevent the interaction from going as well as it might otherwise have.

Further, such flourishing brings with it a distinctive ethical method. It is one whose practices and skills are also integral to good personal relationships. I will discuss such practices in detail in chapter V. Here, I will briefly outline the context and methods relevant to attaining a quality of interaction.

On this view of ethical conduct, the attainment of a quality of interaction is an inherently *local* project, tied to a subject’s social world. This contrasts with concern for abstract or stipulated moral communities – such as a universal moral community or a

nation-state or polity. It also contrasts with ethics as a method for guiding difficult practical choices on one's stance towards contested issues, such as capital punishment or experiments on animals for human benefit. As Joel Kupperman (2010) notes, the latter is a poor representation of how people arrive at many of their (reasonable) actions. These other contexts are sometimes important, but focusing on them obscures an important facet of ethics. Namely, that most people's deepest practical concerns are directed to a limited, local social world – largely constituted by personal interactions and relationships – with the aim that events in this arena go as well as possible. This includes concerns about the safety of a neighbourhood, a person's social standing within that community, and the avoidance of bitter or intense interpersonal conflict that diminishes the quality of life. The quality of this local life and its personal interactions determines whether a life is a flourishing one.

Approaching ethics by starting from serial personal interaction also emphasises a distinctive kind of (deliberate) *action*. Person-to-person interactions often arise unexpectedly, taking place in contingent and dynamic circumstances. And just as a day can feature various unexpected social encounters with people to whom one is familiar to some degree, so many conversations and many shared activities develop dynamically in unforeseen ways. This dynamic, processual quality of interactions, where ends and suggestions for action often arise during and through the interaction, often does not allow for a reflective stepping back to consider options. Similarly, the uniqueness of many of these encounters does not allow for rehearsals of how best to act. Acting well thus becomes a tentative, trial-and-error affair, stripped of the certainty associated with detached reflection and carefully-made choices. Under such conditions, action often takes the form of intuitive or *spontaneous* responses aimed at securing the quality of experience described above. The normative demand that interactions go well is thus, in a sense, an *illiberal* demand. Many of the interactions that make up this local social world cannot be readily avoided or aborted.

The contingent and often unpredictable nature of person-to-person interactions brings a further implication for ethical method: a highly personal and *particularistic approach* to the people encountered within this rolling series of interactions. The most obvious such trait or skill pertaining to particulars is *attentiveness* to the person or

persons involved in the interaction, as well as the context in which the interaction arises. As Iris Murdoch aptly notes, ‘Human beings are obscure to each other, in certain respects which are particularly relevant to morality, unless they are mutual objects of attention or have common objects of attention’ (p.32). She describes attention as, ‘The characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent’ (p.33), and as, ‘The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation...’ (1970, p.39).²²⁴ Interactions go best when one pays attention to the particular details of the person encountered, the features of the situation and the content of interaction. Particularly important here is the idea that careful attention can itself directly stimulate or suggest action; this contrasts with the idea that ethical action is the result of deliberative judgment, and fits with the above observation about the often limited scope for reflective endorsement of actions within interactions. Furthermore, to pay such attention to a particular person is partly what it means to have a personal relationship with them.

Other relevant skills or capacities required to realise this ideal and also to conduct personal relationships include empathy (understood as the project of understanding what one’s interlocutor is thinking or feeling), and the use of creative imagination to arrive at appropriate action. Imagination here means such cognitive activities as apprehending particular practically-relevant features of the situation and person(s) involved, as well as the ability to relate the present situation to relevant previous experiences. Also important is an appreciation of commonalities or similarities – making associations between what is presently perceived and some relevant fact or memory – and the ability to recognise patterns or regularities emerging in an interaction or in a series of interactions, and which might be grounds for action.

The dynamic and contingent nature of imaginative personal interaction also require practical reasoning very different from judgments guided by the conventional norms typical of custom or narrow moral theory. An approach to practical reason that

²²⁴ Other thinkers who have made use of attention in ethical theorising include Nel Noddings (2002) and Lawrence Blum (1994, especially chapter 2). See also Martha Nussbaum (1992). Murdoch’s concept of attention has been seen as a basis for care ethics (Blum 1994). And, as mentioned earlier, in emphasising the personal, the account presented here draws on similar themes. However, it is worth noting that Murdoch presents attentiveness in an explicitly aesthetic context, as part of her insistence on the link between art and morality. She writes, ‘So that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals...’ (1971, p.40). In presenting an aestheticised notion of flourishing, I hope to offer a novel way of developing Murdoch’s pithy but fecund remarks.

emphasises effortless and spontaneous responses that make the most of the situation serve alongside attention, empathy, and imagination to create relationships distinguished by the quality of interaction described above. The ethical categories described in chapter III can also be added to this methodological approach – including serial personal obligation and practices of justification structured around personal relationships.

Another important characteristic of ethical conduct derived from the standpoint of person-to-person interaction is the possession of a certain kind of personal sensibility or orientation towards other people. This might be described as a *malleability of intention or disposition*. For interactions to go as well as possible requires a certain kind of ideal ethical subject. This is one whose intentions and actions are susceptible to influence by those with whom he or she interacts, making them better able to achieve a quality of interaction. I return to this sensibility and its dispositions and their co-ordinating effects in the next chapter. Here I will note only the contrast between such malleability of motivation and ethical motivations that cohere around deliberative judgments guided by universal principles or personal projects.

2.7 The creation of events as a personal relationship

The preceding discussion indicated why the ideal of creating events in personal interaction constitutes an ethics of personal relationships and not merely, for example, a pseudo-ethics for promoting a joy-filled time. Another important point to note is that the creation of events within person-to-person interaction, through the practices and methods described, constitutes a form or species of personal relationship. Creating events cultivates and sustains a personal relationship, and the greater the familiarity with another, the greater the ease with which events can be created. To make clearer how the ideal of creating events represents one ideal form of ethical personal relationship, we can distinguish it from other ideals sometimes taken to define a personal relationship.

One such ideal was noted in chapter II. A personal relationship is also sometimes understood as a biological tie or socially-recognised role, such as father and son. Such ties clearly give rise to moral obligations. But a biological connection is clearly not sufficient for a personal relationship, since it is compatible with having no personal contact. Similarly, as noted earlier, a socially-defined role is not personal but generic, and

the more a relationship such as father and son develops personally then the less it is a relationship defined by role.

Perhaps the most familiar sense of 'personal relationship' is the holding of an attitude towards a particular person that is the result of appreciating who that person (really) is – his or her character. An attitude such as loving, liking or admiring is experienced towards that person but not others. This general attitude or affective response is founded on a comprehensive appreciation of the other established over time and through prolonged exposure. This ideal form of relationship is expressed, for example, in Aristotle's account of virtue or character friendship, and in the idea of non-instrumental or unconditional concern for the well-being of a particular person. This ideal is sometimes taken as the highest or most ethical form of personal relationship.

There are many good reasons for valuing this kind of personal relationship. Whether it is the most ethically important kind of personal relationship is debatable, however, one account of the partiality and exclusivity that characterise it. Section three below takes up this question, but here let me just note that the ideal of attaining a quality of interaction is not necessarily grounded on such intimacy with and approval of character.

Another ideal sometimes thought to define a personal relationship is that of a relationship voluntarily undertaken; this is usually contrasted with relationships in which social expectation or some other external pressure guides personal interaction. But as noted above, the ideal of a voluntarily consent or consciously and freely chosen relationships do not capture what makes a relationship personal. Personal relationships often emerge through gradually increasing familiarity with the particulars of a person, without the experience of choosing and consent arising. Repeated interactions with another often, by themselves, lead to confidence or even inspiration about how to act personally and appropriately towards him or her. Certainly, the kind of personal relationship built around events, drawing as it does on serial personal obligation (as presented in the previous chapter), does not recognise a clear voluntary-involuntary distinction.

That the quality of interaction achieved between persons is an important constitutive element of a personal relationship is confirmed by everyday experience of

them. Some personal relationships are characterised by the delight participants take in each other's company, eagerly anticipating time spent together and so on. Thoughts of upcoming interactions are marked by a sense of excitement, and interactions distinguished by a sense of ease and satisfaction, and the belief that here is someone who 'gets' oneself. This contrasts with relations characterised by, for example, affection or even love but lacking this quality of interaction – such as a parent and teenage child relationship afflicted by a 'generation gap'. One or both parties might also have respect, a sense of dutifulness and act generously to the other, and yet find the interactions to be difficult or unrewarding.

Just as the mother-child relationship is sometimes taken to be the model for an ethic of care, so the ideal form of relationship described above might be understood as a kind of friendship; we might call it *event friendship*. Such a relationship is thus analogous to Aristotle's account of *philia*. Both describe a personal relationship that unifies a society, cuts across social divisions, and which occurs within multiple kinds of personal relationships sometimes thought to be distinct, such as those of the family, lovers or spouses, citizens, and friends (in the modern individualistic and private sense).

It might be asked what the account presented so far has to do with Confucian thought, since it makes no explicit reference to that school. Further, in failing to articulate an ethical vision in which the family is clearly at the centre, it might be thought that it could not be an account of a Confucian ethical vision.

However, as noted at the end of the last chapter, there are reasons for being wary of an account of ethical conduct that focuses too narrowly on the family. Further, this account does not deny the importance of the family, but rather grants it an instrumental role in creating the ethical subject described here.

I believe the account here does represent one possible way in which the early Confucian thinking about the contours of an ethical life can be developed. Whether it is ultimately labelled Confucian or not is a secondary issue; what matters is that the account is an attempt to develop ethical insights present in the early Confucian texts. A textual investigation of those early texts might enrich the analytical sketch presented, suggesting

how it might be developed further. We now turn to that tradition, by way of a brief contrast of principle-based moral theory, feminist ethics and Confucian thought.

3. The role of personal relationships in Confucian harmony

3.1 A Confucian practical ethical ideal: harmony

Chapter II discussed traditional forms of moral theory, particularly consequentialist and Kantian forms, and some difficulties with these. Bernard Williams (1985) labelled this approach as the ‘Morality System’, because of its heightened concern with obligation: the demand to comply with a test for the rightness of action, which holds independently of the desires and interests of a person.

Annette Baier (1995) also responds critically to these moral theories, distinguishing between them and what she describes as a ‘woman’s moral theory’. Accepting that obligation is the distinguishing features of these theories (1995, p.22), she suggests that they represent a male approach to morality – specifically, the view of enlightenment moral thinkers such as Kant. In response, Baier asks: ‘What do women want from a moral theory?’ The alternative foundational concept she focuses on is ‘trust’ (p.27). Briefly, her account of trust is based on a Lockean model: entrusting something one values to the care of someone else, thereby becoming vulnerable to harm and loss. In the same spirit as Baier, we might ask: ‘What do the Confucians want from a moral theory?’ The answer is *harmony*; and one sense of this Confucian term is, I believe, analogous to the ideal of creating events outlined above.²²⁵

Chenyang Li writes, ‘*He* 和 (harmony, harmonisation) is probably the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture’ (2006, p.583). This claim might be correct but, as Li notes, we should not expect a simple definition for such a complex ideal. The term is associated with a range of meanings and distinct practical ideals. For example, *he* (harmony) can refer to cosmic order and a kind of cosmic metaphysical unity,²²⁶ or to

²²⁵ To talk of a ‘Confucian moral theory’ is not to claim the Confucians offer a single test for the rightness of an action. Such ethical theory deals only with the discursive project of foregrounding certain ideas and practical ideals in order to guide action.

²²⁶ For example, ‘Grand Harmony’ (太和) is a prominent ideal in the *Yijing*’s (易经 *Book of Changes*) Tuanzhan commentary on the Qian Hexagram. Understanding harmony to be a property of the largest possible unit, including society as a whole, is sometimes regarded as ethically problematic, due to the implicit devaluing of individuals and, by implication, their personal relationships. For example, the

accord between humans and nature; it can be a comment on the smooth running of society and a general social accord, or as a comment on good laws;²²⁷ it can also describe people occupying a social station and performing the duties appropriate to it.²²⁸

The kind of Confucian harmony I want to focus on here, however, is affective, inhering in personal interactions and arising between persons. In this section, I show how the ideal of creating events, or the achievement of a certain quality of personal interaction, mirrors this sense of harmony implicit in the texts. The first step in such a mutual mapping is to point out that the ideal Confucian ethical subject is one constituted by affective experiences.

3.2 The Confucian ethical subject as affective experiences directed towards everyday interaction

The Confucian classic, the *Zhongyong* (中庸), often called *The Doctrine of the Mean*, outlines the developmental path (*dao* 道) of the ideal Confucian ethical subject or sage. Its opening section explains harmony as follows:

Happiness and anger, sorrow and joy; before they arise this is called balanced (*zhong* 中); arising in the proper rhythms (*jie* 節) this is called harmonious (*he* 和). Balanced, this is the great root of the world; harmonious, this is the ultimate path of the world. Reaching balanced harmony, the heavens and earth take their proper place and the myriad things and events of the world are thereby nurtured (Sec. 1).

The passage tells us that harmony, as the appropriate experiencing of joy, anger, sorrow and delight, is the pre-eminent characteristic of the ideal Confucian sage: it is the ‘ultimate path’ of the world (天下之達道). Further, such appropriate experiencing of affective states is a precondition of wider social responsibility and influence (nurturing

Japanese government’s 1937 declaration *Fundamentals of our National Polity* was criticised for its totalitarian implications (De Bary 1964, pp. 278-87). This is not the account of harmony I wish to explore here.

²²⁷ The Confucian classic the *Zhouli*, Tianguan section, states that the role of ministers is to harmonise the nation (和邦國). *Mencius* 3B1 implies that harmony is the highest social good: ‘Good timing is not as good as being advantageously situated, and being advantageously situated is not as good as having harmonious people’. Such harmony can be understood as the smooth functioning of appropriate social policy: *Mencius*’s description of his well-system land distribution (fields divided into 9 sections in the manner suggested visually by the character for a water well 井) is also described in terms of the ideal of harmony (3A3).

²²⁸ Passage 12.11 in the *Analects*, for example, suggests such a social order.

the myriad things and events of the world - 萬物育焉), and affective experience is presented as a reliable guide to practical action.²²⁹

What constitutes ‘appropriate’ affective experience within this Confucian vision? Partly, it is the familiar formal idea that emotions are experienced with the appropriate intensity and none to excess.²³⁰ But two other aspects of the Confucian view are relevant. The first is that appropriate affective experience is a foundational moral idea which, as expressed in the *Mencius*, serves as the basis for a theory of ‘human nature’ or seemingly inescapable human sensitivities and dispositions (*xing* 性). As 2A6 depicts, the Confucian ethical subject is distinguished by four affective stances: benevolent feelings or compassion; a sense of disdain and shame; a disposition to yield and defer; and a sense of right and wrong, which includes feeling of righteous indignation. The *Mencius* conveys a confidence that all people will experience the world in terms of such affective responses, and that these incipient sensitivities or ‘shoots’ (*duan* 端) will develop appropriately with experience, provided a certain standard of well-being is secured. Secondly, such appropriate affective experience is not achieved simply through the meditative or wilful disciplining of inner feelings, achieved in spite of or with minimal reference to the everyday world. As the *Zhongyong* makes clear, the ideal Confucian character is one whose affective life attains a rhythmic or dynamic attunement (*jie* 節) with the social world.²³¹ The affective states that constitute harmony are, in some sense, aroused through personal interaction.

²²⁹ The title of this text – *Zhongyong* – is also relevant to the account of ideal conduct being developed here. It is composed of two characters, *zhong* 中 and *yong* 庸. *Zhong* means focus, balance, hitting the target, or maintaining a dynamic equilibrium. *yong* means ‘everyday’, ‘commonplace’, with the character originally denoting the menial manual task of de-husking rice. The idea of focusing on the everyday and the seemingly commonplace, which in our discussion is given determinate form as personal interactions, is thus implicit in the text’s title. Section three of the *Zhongyong*, quoted at the start of this chapter, makes this practical standpoint explicit: ‘Focusing the familiar affairs of the day is a task of the highest order. It is rare among the common people to be able to sustain it for long’ (Section 3, trans. Hall and Ames).

²³⁰ This ideal of appropriate affective response is illustrated by *Analects* frequent endorsement of the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经) and, in particular, Confucius’ endorsement of the *Cry of the Osprey* ode in 3.20: ‘The Cry of the Osprey is pleasing without being excessive and allows for grief without being too painful.’

²³¹ The character *jie* 節 originally referred to the knots or joints of bamboo which, the *Lushi Chunqiu* (Gule chapter) claims, were used to make musical instruments. It also means section, season or festival, indicating behaviour in tune with the occasion or time of year. Hence, it conveys adjustment to the situation, a connotation made explicit in its derivative meanings of ‘economise’ or ‘regulate’, and *jie* more recent meaning of ‘moral integrity’.

Another Confucian classic, the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经) illustrates this social and inter-subjective character aspect of affective harmony, describing how affective experiences are shared by participants in the social situation. For example, Ode 161 contains the following:

The deer sound pleasantly as they graze in the field,
I entertain honourable guests with the music of drums and strings
With such beautiful music, there are profound harmony (*he*) and joy (*le*).
With elegant wines, I entertain the heart of the honourable guest

Similarly, Ode 164 includes:

Enjoying the dishes and wines with all your brothers,
There are harmony (*he*) and joy (*le*) like playful children.
Enjoying the union with wife and children,
It is like the mingling of drums and strings.
With brothers in concord there are profound harmony and joy.
Thus you bring good to house and home,
Joy to wife and child.
I have deeply studied; I have pondered.
It is truly so.

The poems suggest that ‘affective harmony’ is created by attending to and appreciating events unfolding before oneself in the here-and-now, whether this is understood formally or more playfully and idiosyncratically.

As Stephen Owen notes (1996, xvii-xx), when compared to classical Greek prose poetry, heroic values are largely absent from the *Shijing*. Heroic values typically call for radical or dramatic action, and the wilful or dutiful performance of actions while restraining emotions that might otherwise undermine resolve. In contrast, the Confucian vision expressed through the *Zhongyong* and its appropriation of the *Shijing* presents admired or ideal conduct through multiple scenes of unremarkable everyday life, and the affective experiences inherent in these provide the raw material for a folk morality.²³²

An example of this contrast is how the word ‘courage’ functions in early Greece and China. In Plato’s *Laches*, courage is a martial virtue. However, the term often translated as ‘courage’ in texts such as the *Analects*, *yong* 勇, is not a martial virtue but a social one: a strength of conviction to do what one believes appropriate despite the

²³² We should also note that the social gatherings described in the section of the *Shijing* from which these songs are taken (called the *Xiaoya* or Minor Odes), are not simple romantic poems. They are typically devices for the maintenance of social and political power, and the poems detail the forming of plots and the conducting of negotiations. The arousing and directing of affective experience through such events are thus important socially, not merely for their subjective quality.

danger of social censure or worse; and the relevant vice is boorishness or unruliness resulting from eagerness and impetuosity in speech and deed.²³³ Both the Confucian appropriation of the *Shijing* and the precise nature of the virtues such as *yong* suggest that the primary concern of the Confucian ideal subject, a literate and cultured person,²³⁴ is to realise harmonious affective experience in the course of ordinary personal interaction.²³⁵

Further confirmation of the importance of affective experience to Confucian ethical discourse is found in the *Mencius*. Here, it is portrayed as being the ‘fruit’ of the core classical Confucian ethical values of humaneness or exemplary conduct (*ren* 仁) and a sense of justice or appropriateness (*yi* 義). In a fascinating passage in the *Mencius*, *ren* and *yi*, as well as ritualised conduct and music, are portrayed as reaching a kind of fulfilment, what might loosely be termed their practical conclusion, in a moving joyful experience.²³⁶ 4A27 reads:

Mengzi said, ‘The most authentic expression (*shi* 實²³⁷) of humaneness (*ren* 仁) is serving one’s parents. The most authentic expression of a sense of justice and appropriateness (*yi* 義) is going along with one’s elder brother. The most authentic expression of wisdom (*zhi* 智) is knowing these two things and not abandoning them. The most authentic expression of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is regulating and civilising (*wen* 文) these two. The most authentic expression of music is taking joy (*le* 樂) in these two. When there is joy, they grow. When they grow, how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then without realising, one’s feet begin to step in time to them and one’s hands dance according to their rhythms’ (Irene Bloom 2011, p. 84, translation modified).²³⁸

This passage is important for several reasons. Firstly, wisdom (*zhi* 智), including practical wisdom, means understanding how to conduct personal relationships.²³⁹ But,

²³³ See 2.24, 5.7, 6.10, 17.23 and 17.24.

²³⁴ See the discourse on learning (*xue* 學) and acculturation (*wen* 文) in the *Analects*. See, for example, 1.6, 1.7, 1.14 and passim. Also, see section 2.4 below.

²³⁵ As *Zhongyong* 12 puts it, ‘The proper way of exemplary persons has as its start the simple lives of ordinary men and women, and at its furthest limits sheds light upon the entire world’ (trans. Hall and Ames, 1998, p. 93). Reinforcing the affecting, moving aspect of daily interaction, the *Analects* 12.2 reads, ‘When in public comport yourself as if receiving an important guest and in your management of the common people, behave as if you were conducting an important sacrifice’ (Trans. Slingerland 2003).

²³⁶ Though see *Xunzi*’s chapter on music for similar arguments (Watson, 1963, especially pp. 112-4).

²³⁷ *Shi* 實 might also be translated here as ‘fruit’, to indicate that the ‘fruit’ of humaneness (here meaning a sympathetic identification with others) is engagement in one’s parents’ trials and tribulations.

²³⁸ A similar passage also appears in Great Preface to the *Book of Songs* (see Legge 1960, p34): ‘Song is the result of dispositions. It resides in the heart-mind as dispositions and is articulated in language as song. One’s feelings stir within one’s breast, and take form in words. When words are inadequate, they are voiced as sighs. When sighs are inadequate, they are chanted. When chants are inadequate, unconsciously, the hands and feet begin to dance them.’

²³⁹ The Song dynasty commentator You Zuo, for example, explicitly links learning and wisdom discussed by the early Confucians with personal relationships, ‘Learning has solely to do with illuminating human relationships. One able to master the four relationships (husband-wife, child-parent, minister-lord and

further, mastering personal interactions, at least with family, leads to an affective life so rich and intense that the subject is prone to spontaneous and impromptu rhythmical or even musical expressions of it.²⁴⁰ From the perspective of practical action, this ‘moral metaphysics’ might include the hope, familiar from Aristotle, that a subject enjoys doing the things she ought (anyway) to do. But it also leaves room for the thought that one should perform particular actions with the aim of realising affective harmony, even if the actions are not initially pleasant. What action ought to be done depends on whether it tends to realise affective harmony. In what follows I’d like to explore this idea, by focusing on the unusual Confucian fascination with joy or delight (*le* 樂).

3.3 Confucian *le* (樂) and the coordination of action to produce affective harmony

Using the example of *le* (樂 delight or joy) we can show how Confucian ethical thought centred on the coordinating of activity between people to arouse affective harmony. I will first highlight, using the *Analects*, the prominent place of *le* in Confucian thought and then consider how it was a medium through which action was coordinated. I consider how this was achieved formally, through the use of music and ritual, and then consider the analogous case whereby unstructured or unscripted personal interactions could also be orientated towards the same end of affective harmony.

As the *Zhongyong* passage above suggests, Confucian thought recognises various forms of affective experience as integral to affective harmony. These include reverence, shame and grief. As the *Songs* and *Mencius* passages above suggest however, one kind is

friends) can be said to have a deep understanding of human relations. In learning this as the way, can anything be added to it?’ (quoted in Slingerland, 2003, p.3).

²⁴⁰ This striking presence of affecting or aesthetic experience at the heart of moral conduct is also seen in the Confucian texts frequent use of song (i.e., their references to ancient sung poems).²⁴⁰ Having presented a moral point, the texts often then literally break into song: they employ poetic rhythmical devices to reinforce the point to be absorbed by readers. That is, they tie a philosophical claim to an affective or moving experience, thereby making it memorable. As is often the case with such non-linear and aphoristic texts, this suggests that the ideas effective in guiding action are not simply those that strike a person as plausible or reasonable, but those made memorable and so readily recalled at the appropriate moment. This linkage between the affective and the moral also appears in nominally anti-Confucian schools, underlining the importance of this mode of conduct in early China. For example, *Zhuangzi*’s Butcher Ding knack story describes the consummate skill of Ding in terms of attunement to traditional music that celebrated earlier dynastic change (Kjellberg, 2001, p224, n. 36). For other ways in which the *Zhuangzi* and the early Confucians shared philosophical outlook, see John Makeham (1998). For discussion of this role of poetry in the early texts, see Hall and Ames (2003, pp.6-7).

particularly prominent within this normative vision. This is *le* 樂, typically translated as the experience of joy or delight. Without denying that other affective experiences are relevant, I will here focus on the experience of *le* 樂 in order to illustrate how affective harmony can function as a practical ideal for personal interaction.

The practical importance of *le* is particularly apparent in the *Analects*. The prevalence of references to delight, *le* 樂, in the text is a strong indication that, for the early Confucians, an orientation towards delight or joy directs their thought about action. The character for delight *le* 樂, which is also the character for coordinated musical activity (*yue* 樂), appears 48 times in the text, more frequently than the combined total for two terms often thought to be integral to Confucian ethical thought: filial conduct (*xiao* 孝) and appropriateness or a sense of justice (*yi* 義).²⁴¹ The capacity for delight or enjoyment is, for example, characteristic of the *junzi*,²⁴² and is sustained even through material hardship.²⁴³ More importantly, delight is described as a practical ideal above knowledge and even mere liking. Passage 6.20 offers such a hierarchical account, ‘Knowing something is no match for liking it; liking it is no match for delighting in it’ (知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者).²⁴⁴ That a text as terse as the *Analects* should make a distinction between liking and delighting, in a way perhaps puzzling to contemporary thinking about how to determine action, alerts us to the fine-grained distinctions between affective experiences in the Confucian texts. Of greater significance, however, is that the most important value or experience for ordering conduct is not some form of moral knowledge, nor rational command of the emotions; rather it is confidence in affective sensibilities and treating them as a determining force of action. A sense of delight or, at least satisfaction, can be a robust practical force.

It might be objected that the experience of delight or joy is a trivial foundation for an idealised conception of practical activity. ‘Delight’ might be regarded as merely a

²⁴¹ Passages emphasising delight include 1.15, 4.2, and 7.19.

²⁴² Confucius describes himself as, ‘Someone who enjoys himself so much that he forgets to eat’ (7.19).

²⁴³ Confucius’ disciple Yan Hui, as a refined character, is able to endure hardship without any effect on his enjoyment (6.11). See also 1.15.

²⁴⁴ This passage is often read as a summary of the stages of the Confucian path of cultivation (see Slingerland, 2000 p. 59). If so, this suggests that the highest stage of self-cultivation is one characterised by the ability to create and experience delight, further underlining the practical importance of delight in the Confucian ethical vision. Passage 6.20 should be read in tandem with 8.8, which is discussed below.

synonym for pleasure which, especially through its traditional Greek and Christian associations with the body and base pleasures, can lead to an unethical preoccupation with individual pleasure. Certainly, a traditional aim of many moralities has been to restrict the unilateral pursuit of pleasure. Delight and pleasure have also been associated with a picture of the emotions as capricious and unreliable. Therefore, pleasure might be thought of as private or inner experiences that, unlike rational discourse, cannot perform a distinctive function of morality: co-ordinating interpersonal conduct.

One might reply that pleasure has in fact served as the basis for some ethical theories, including early utilitarian theory as well as hedonistic egoism. Taking up John Dewey's challenge above – to give enjoyment the philosophical attention it demands – we might defend delight or joy by considering its place in an alternative ethical tradition. Accordingly, I will here focus on a reconstruction of a possible Confucian answer to this scepticism.

One possibility to consider is whether a meaningful distinction should be drawn between *le* (樂) and pleasure. Even if English terms like delight and joy are inextricably linked with pleasure, perhaps the affective experiences denoted by the Chinese term *le* are not best translated as delight or joy. Much like umami was for so long an undescribed and therefore 'unrecognised' flavour, *le* 樂 could refer to affective experiences not widely described in contemporary thought – perhaps something akin to 'ease' or a deep sense of satisfaction.²⁴⁵

Recognising 'ease' as an important affective experience, for example, would fit with the Confucian practical ideal of spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) – the capacity to act appropriately without recourse to self-conscious deliberation or, as Confucius puts it in his auto-biographical account, 'to give my heart-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries' (*Analects* 2.4).²⁴⁶ It is not necessary here to attempt to delimit an alternative affective state, however. What is important for present purposes is simply that the words

²⁴⁵ Such a possibility is suggested by Wittgenstein's lecture on ethics (1965). He identified ethics and religion with certain feelings of 'absolute value', such as the experience of wonder or of feeling safe. He further suggested that descriptions of such experiences were beyond language. It is not necessary to agree with this claim of such experiences being ineffable or inexpressible, however, to appreciate that there might be other experiences of what Wittgenstein called 'absolute value', which are neglected in contemporary attempts to articulate affective experiences.

²⁴⁶ For discussion of the ideal of spontaneity or effortless action, see Edward Slingerland (2007) or PJ Ivanhoe (2008).

‘delight’ and ‘joy’ not be taken as an exhaustive and closed definition of the kind of affective experience constituting the practical ideal of *le* (樂).

A second and more direct response is that *le* is not obviously associated with dubious pleasure, at least not pleasure of a private, bodily and subjective kind that is morally problematic and ill-suited to the task of coordinating and directing action. Bodily desire and pleasure are not identified as a pressing ethical problem in early Confucian texts, and there is no term that specifically identifies the concept.²⁴⁷ The paradigmatically ‘unethical’ subjects of the *Analects*, for example, the petty person (小人) or the thief of virtue (德之賊) are not incontinent figures overcome with passions or bodily passions; they are predominantly calculating figures, driven by material-gain and social honour.²⁴⁸ In so far as their psychological states are described, these are characterised by agitation and a lack of composure.²⁴⁹ On the contrary, as Xunzi makes clear (echoing the *Mencius* passage above), *le* is simply an inevitable human disposition that must be expressed outwardly.²⁵⁰

Perhaps the most important argument that *le* is an important ethical term, however, comes from the confidence invested in it as a means to coordinate action. This is clear from the second meaning of the Chinese character used for delight or joy (樂): musical conduct, *yue* 樂, understood broadly to include social activities like singing and dancing. The character for delight or joy, *le* 樂, is the same character that indicates the shared and coordinated activity of making music, *yue* 樂.²⁵¹ Shared musical interaction is thus an important gloss on delight: it is something that inheres in a social event and coordinates

²⁴⁷ The two most familiar forms of bodily pleasure – sex and food – sometimes appear simply as the characters for food and sex respectively, with the pleasure left implicit. For example, *Mencius*’ debate with Gaozi over human nature in 6A4 reads, ‘The desire for food and sex are human nature’ (告子曰食色性也). *Yu* (desire, 欲) might sometimes indicate such pleasure seeking. *Analects* 4.5 reads, ‘Wealth and honour are what people desire...’ 富與貴，是人之所欲也。But *yu* also refers to less visceral and more deliberative desire, most obviously in the form of the Golden or Silver rule (see 5.12, 4.24).

²⁴⁸ See for example, 4.11, 4.16, 13.26, 15.21 and 17.13.

²⁴⁹ *Analects* 7.37 and 15.2.

²⁵⁰ The beginning of the *Xunzi* ‘On Music’ chapter begins, ‘Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. Since man cannot help feeling joy, it must find an outlet in voice and human movement’ (Watson, 1964, p.112, translation modified).

²⁵¹ The idea that harmony in music can bring about harmony between people is an old one, dating back before the Confucian texts to the oracle bones and bronze inscriptions. See Chenyang Li (2006).

people's affective experiences.²⁵² The *Book of Rites (Liji)* illustrates this coordination of affective experience through music:

For this reason, when there is music in the ancestral temple, both ruler and minister, superior and inferior listen to it together, and none fails to be harmonious and respectful. When there is music among the clan elders and townspeople, elder and younger listen to it together, and none fails to be harmonious and orderly. When it is played within the gates and doorways of a house, father and son, older and younger brother together listen to it, and none fails to be harmonious and intimate. Thus it is music...that unites father and son, ruler and minister; it is music that creates familial bonds among a myriad of peoples. This is the method behind the former king establishment of music (19.28/104/24)²⁵³.

This confidence in the power of musical experience to coordinate action reaches its crescendo in the belief that listening to music can cause or incite a subject to act appropriately within interpersonal relationships – in this case, the five cardinal Confucian relationships. Particular pieces of music or notes could inspire people to perform their particular social roles properly by inciting the affective experiences appropriate to that role. The 'Record of Music' section of the *Book of Ritual* reads:

Therefore the ancient kings...gave laws for the great and small notes according to their names, and harmonized the order of the beginning and the end, to represent the doing of things. Thus they made the underlying principles of the relations between the near and distant relatives, the noble and mean, the old and young, males and females, all to appear manifestly in the music (trans. Legge, 1967, pp. 108-9).

We might be sceptical how exactly music can bring about such distinctive effects. But regardless of the plausibility of the alleged link between music and social role, this passage conveys the Confucian belief that affective experiences can coordinate interpersonal relationships and produce harmony.

As music plays a role in generating shared affective experiences, i.e., a kind of harmony, so a similar interpretation can be applied to another key Confucian concept: *li* (禮, ritualised interaction). What makes *li* an important ethical concept, within the Confucian view and arguably beyond, is the same ideal: starting from a basic ethical

²⁵² For passages detailing the social dimension of delight *le* (樂) see, for example 3.3 or 16.5.

²⁵³ A similar passage in the *Xunzi* reads: 'When music is performed in the ancestral temple of the ruler, and the ruler and his ministers, superiors and inferiors, listen to it together, there are none who are not filled with a spirit of harmonious reverence (*jing* 敬). When it is performed within the household, and fathers and sons, elder and younger brothers listen to it together, there are none who are not filled with a spirit of harmonious affection (*qin* 亲). Hence music brings about complete unity and induces harmony. It is sufficient to lead men in the way or to bring order to the myriad things' (Watson, 1963, p. 113, translation modified).

subject that is an ‘emotional’ subject, and moulding its affective experiences around a common social life to create affective harmony.²⁵⁴

This is not the only way of understanding Confucian ritual, of course. It might be seen as an attempt to create social order through adherence to fixed and relatively concrete social rules and principles, sustained by a system of punishments and rewards.²⁵⁵ But as the *Analects* makes very clear, punishment has only a minor role in the Confucian vision, and the importance of ritual does not reside in rule following.²⁵⁶ Ritual could also be linked to attempts to socialise and habituate subjects into certain patterns of interaction that avoid conflict and promote general social accord and harmony, and this is certainly part of ritual’s purpose; but this fails to recognise its affective dimension. Recognising the role of *li* in creating affective harmony also defuses the objection noted at the end of chapter II, that the Confucian concern with ritualised conduct is an unreflective propagating of traditional precedents and practices, which appear oppressive or gender-biased from a modern perspective. It also avoids the metaphysically problematic reading of ritual, and Confucian personal relationships, as fixed features within a larger pre-ordained cosmic order (as later dynastic Confucian thought suggested).

The *Analects* supports this understanding of ritual as integral to the creation of the right kind of affective experiences, structuring these around the social events and practices that confirm a group of people as a community. Passage 8.8, echoing 6.20 quoted above, suggests a role for ritual in creating an affective life, one sensitised to the creation of delight. Passage 8.8 describes the development of the Confucian ethical subject, and if such development is understood in the Mencian tradition as the development of the four affective sprouts noted earlier, then it might be read as, ‘The Master said: the Songs arouse [the affective life], ritual shapes it [around the social world] and musical experience brings it to completion’ (興於詩，立於禮，成於樂).²⁵⁷ The

²⁵⁴ For a detailed account of the gradual, historical shaping of emotions around communal practices and symbols see Li Zehou (2010). The following discussion draws on that account.

²⁵⁵ For a passage referring to ritual as being something like accordance with protocol see 3.19.

²⁵⁶ For example, 3.2 reads: Confucius said: ‘If you govern the people legalistically and control them by punishment, they will avoid crime, but have no sense of shame. If you govern them by means of excellence and control them with ritual propriety, they will have a sense of shame and correct themselves.’

²⁵⁷ *Xing* might be read with less stress on the affective element, as simply ‘flourish’ or ‘begin’ (see 13.5). But *Xing* in the *Analects* often has an affective and motivational sense of ‘inspiring’ or ‘arousing’. See, for example, 8.2, and 17.9.

importance of affective experience to ritual is further confirmed by 1.12: ‘The most valuable function of ritual is [the creation of] harmony; it is precisely such harmony that made the way of the former kings a thing of beauty’ (禮之用, 和為貴. 先王之道, 斯為美). Similarly, 17.11 states:

The Master said, ‘In referring time and again to observing ritual propriety (*li*), how could I just be talking about gifts of jade and silk? In referring time and again to making music (*yue*), how could I just be talking about bells and drums?’ (trans Ames and Rosemont, 1998, p. 206)²⁵⁸.

We might understand ritual as a gathering of people, in which all participate in a social event.²⁵⁹ Ritual thus directs people’s attention towards communal social events and so structures participants’ affective experiences around the practices and gestures that make up these ritualised interactions. Since the actions, gestures and objects used are integrated and mutually enhancing, with each contributing to the full effect of the ritual, then the affective experiences that form around these will also have an element of mutual compatibility.

Several contemporary thinkers have offered a similar account of *li*. For example, Tu Wei-ming (1972) claims that *li* means not only ritual practice and behaviour but also includes within its conceptual boundaries the Mencian affective subject depicted above (*Mencius* 2A6). Similarly, Herbert Fingarette points out that a Confucian ethical subject is one that masters social forms and conventions, thereby becoming able to ‘magically’ (1972, p.4) elicit a response from others.²⁶⁰ Fingarette is particularly insightful in pointing out how the myriad layers of social meaning that provoke action are richer than the narrow normative concept of custom discussed in the previous section. While custom often refers to that which is the object of a conscious normative demand, Fingarette makes clear that one who masters *li* is able to exert influence and generate affective responses, even where no normative and public social code is explicitly invoked.

Fingarette’s account points towards one important kind of affective experience associated with ritual: playing one’s role within ritualised interaction is a powerful source of self-esteem and dignity. Being able to respond in a variety of situations through

²⁵⁸ Other passages confirming the importance of affective experience in ritualised interaction include 1.13, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.26.

²⁵⁹ See Roy Rappaport (1979) for a helpful discussion of what makes an event a ritual and analysis of the constitutive features of ritual.

²⁶⁰ Fingarette writes of ritual that ‘The magical element involves great effects produced effortlessly, marvellously, with an irresistible power that is itself intangible, invisible, manifest’ (1972, p.4).

awareness of relevant conventions and practices, and so becoming an object of reverence and esteem, provides an intriguing contrast with the practical standpoint of projects and a life plan;²⁶¹ on the latter model, self-esteem is grounded in self-expression and the use of higher deliberative powers in pursuing life plan, as well as the realisation of these.²⁶²

The idea that each participant contributes to the overall effect, and shares in the collective spectacle or experience characteristic of ritual, can be neatly conveyed by a sporting analogy. Consider a contemporary professional sporting event like a basketball or soccer match. The players, coaches, referees and crowd each have their distinct but individual part to play in the event going well. If there were no umpires for example, the game might descend into bickering between players; if there was no audience, the players might be less motivated than they in fact are. The actions of each are also constrained by the existence of certain norms (the rules of the game for players and referees, reliable strategies for coaches, and chants that are motivating without being offensive for the supporters) while still leaving room for interpretation and personal effort (even the referees have to make interpretive inferences from the rules, based on their own experiences and judgments); and whether the event goes well or badly depends on the contribution of each of these participants. But the event itself, considered as a whole draws, incites and forms the object for an important kind of affective experience, which we are here calling delight, which distinguishes it as an event. The delight that participants feel will be both intrinsically rewarding to the subject, based partly on their engagement in and contribution to the overall event, and also a response to or appreciation of that event. Further, the memory of the event (or the memory of what was experienced that made what happened an event) does itself serve to regulate and direct action. Participants might seek to repeat the experience, and be willing to be more civilised in other areas of personal interaction in order to preserve the conditions or

²⁶¹ For example, JS Mill writes on this issue: 'He who chooses his plan for himself employs all of his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision' (1975, 56).

²⁶² Despite this putative link, Fingarette's reading of the *Analects* as explicitly lacking a folk psychological theory prevents him from developing this line of thought and granting adequate recognition to the place of affective experiences like delight and reverence in ritual. Despite this, Fingarette cannot avoid using a series of psychological or sentiment-filled terms to describe the ceremony-orientated person, such as 'serious-minded', 'solemnity' and 'sacred' (p63-4).

society necessary to ensure this. They might also feel a certain respect for those who shared in it and even a preparedness to identify with and protect the community that contributed to it. In summary, treating delight or joy (and perhaps other affective states) as important practical forces is thus not a trivial distraction but a means to a social order.

In this way, ritual (and its accoutrement, music) can be understood as something resembling an event of the kind outlined in the first section of this chapter. That is, ritualised action can transform an interaction into an event.

There is, however, a problem with proceeding directly to claim that such events constitute an ethical ideal. Simply put, the rituals and symbols that generate shared affective experience such as delight can be ethically questionable. That the Nazi's Nuremburg Rallies were also events is a case in point. To preserve this basic picture of events motivating and coordinating human interaction, we must extract it from the historical and communitarian frameworks that ritual practices impose, and recognise it on a more local, contingent and personal level – the level of personal interactions.

This means reasoning by analogy from more formal and conventional ritualised events. Similar events can be created within personal interactions of a less formal kind, where the interactions are not specified in advance, or to a lesser degree and less systematically than with formal ritualised events. We must read the Confucian tradition as offering a vision of less scripted and more personal interaction, where the creation of such small-scale personal events constitute the kind of event friendship described above.

In the *Analects*, when friendship is explicitly discussed, it seems to refer to a relationship that can aid self-cultivation, and takes a quasi-instrumental form. A person's stance towards friends is a reflection of that person's potential contribution to or diminishment of cultivation and refinement.²⁶³ Paradoxically, this framework suggests that Confucian friendship is self-interested; and in so far as self-interest is considered to be non-moral, so friendship might appear to lie outside the realm of moral action.

The text does, however, contain insights and concepts that suggest a species of friendship constructed around affective experiences such as delight. Consider the very first line of the text: 'To have a friend visit from afar, is it not a joy (*le 樂*)?' (1.1, trans.

²⁶³ It advises, for example, 'Don't befriend those not the equal of yourself' (9.25). See also 12.24 and 15.10. For a study of Confucian friendship as one centered on self-cultivation, see Hall and Ames (1994).

Slingerland 2003).²⁶⁴ The idea that friendship partly consists in arriving at some kind of agreeable shared emotional experience is reinforced by the striking passage of 11.26. Confucius asks his students how they might best express their worth or recognition, and after the other disciples have given answers pertaining to the political realm, the disciple Zengxi answers:

At the end of spring with the spring clothes having already been finished, I would like, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain and then return home singing.’
The Master heaved a deep sigh and declared, ‘I’m with Zengxi! (11.26).

This passage encapsulates the idea that affective harmony – shared delight - is created through unstructured activities as these arise among people in the course of the day (in contrast to the more structured activities of ritual). As the rest of the passage makes clear, it also places such activity above political rulership. This passage reprises the mood of odes considered earlier, that harmony amounts to teasing out moving and memorable experiences from typically unremarkable situations. What makes this reading more compelling is that the Confucian texts offer a particularistic methodology for sustaining this ideal of affective harmony. I will briefly sketch this method’s constitutive practices.

3.4. Creating affective harmony (events) through a Confucian particularism

The first evidence of a more contextual and particularistic form of harmony comes from one of the central Confucian metaphors for harmony. Consider *Analects* 13.23, ‘*Junzi* harmonise, they do not agree; petty people agree but do not harmonise.’ The *Zuo Zhuan* commentary on this passage reads:

Harmony (*he*) is like making soup. One needs water, fire, vinegar, sauce, salt, and plum to cook fish and meat. One needs to cook them with firewood, combine (*he*) them together in order to balance the taste. One needs to compensate for deficiencies and reduce excessiveness (Duke Zhou, Year 20, Legge 1991, p. 684, Chinese Classics Vol. 5).

The metaphor of cooking to represent harmonious interaction is relevant to the ideal of creating events through personal interaction. Here, harmony is revealed as a

²⁶⁴ A further complication is that it is debatable whether *peng* here really means friend. If interpreted literally in terms of disciples who share a common teacher (同門為朋), then the line could be translated as ‘Isn’t it delightful to have students who come from far away (such is the influence of one’s virtue)?’ While the meaning of *peng* here is not entirely clear (see Y.K Lo, 2008), ‘friend’ is commonly accepted.

nuanced process of experiment and blending; this contrasts with, for example, abiding by the norms inherent in a social role, or even blindly mirroring or sycophantically agreeing with others. This suggests that Confucian harmonising can accommodate distinctive individual contributions to a collective experience. This is confirmed in the same commentary, where piecemeal contributions by individuals refine and make appropriate what was presented in crude form by a ruler:

The relationship between lord and minister is just like this. If in what the lord declares to be acceptable there is something that is not right, the minister submits it to him that it is not right, and in this way what the lord declares acceptable is made perfect. If in what the lord declares to be wrong there is something that is, in fact, acceptable, the minister submits to him that it is acceptable, and in this way the inappropriate aspects of what the lord declares wrong are discarded. In this way, government is perfected. (ibid)

Aside from conceptions of harmony, the Confucian texts also outline the skills and practices needed for approaching personal interactions. These complement the practices noted in section 1.4. One is the use of ritualised conduct (gestures, words, acts) in informal settings rather than formal ceremonial ritual where actions are choreographed. The most obvious example of this is using set phrases or polite language in personal interactions that do not have any formal structure or specified goal. Delight can arise from people doing things exactly as expected.²⁶⁵ Similarly, personal interactions can also become memorable or moving when someone does what is conventionally expected, but with a certain style or panache.²⁶⁶ An interesting example might be the role of polite language (*keigo*) in Japanese. When speaking to the older, younger, the esteemed, the intimate and so on, the language used changes. For example, polite forms of common verbs and personal pronouns are used, with the politeness of the word increasing as the desire to show respect increases. While the semantic meaning conveyed by particular words is nominally the same, changing the language to suit the listener and the occasion can itself have affective force. Complying with the laborious intricacies to make an utterance that is semantically indistinguishable from one using a common verb, convey affect-laden attitudes such as reverence and respect; and appreciation of this attitude on

²⁶⁵ The creation of delight need not always be thought of as active, but can include an element of affection – i.e., delight at finding things exactly as we expected them to be. Thus we can delight in personal interaction simply by finding someone familiar, irrespective of their obvious limitations and flaws that might, in another interaction, prove to be an obstacle to delight.

²⁶⁶ For an analysis of the importance of style to the Confucian *junzi* see Joel Kupperman (2010).

the part of the listener and others present can itself contribute to delight and a moving event.

The Confucian texts, and the *Analects* in particular, also value the attentiveness discussed above. For example, *guan* (觀) or comprehensive observation is a prominent practical ideal in the *Yijing* or Book of Changes, calling for a careful or synoptic view of the situation unfolding before one. In the *Analects*, observing others close at hand, and awareness of what is conveyed through one's own gestures and deportment are repeatedly emphasised.²⁶⁷ Passage 8.4, for example, suggests that demeanour and countenance are more important than the details of ritual:

There are three things the exemplary person (*junzi*) considers of utmost importance in making their way (*dao*); by maintaining a dignified demeanour, they keep violent and rancorous conduct at a distance; by maintaining a proper countenance, they keep trust and confidence near at hand; by taking care in choice of language and mode of expression, they keep vulgarity and impropriety at a distance. As for the details in the arrangement of ritual vessels, there are minor officers to take care of such things (trans. Ames and Rosemont, 1998, p 121)²⁶⁸.

In fact, one of the *Analects*' clearest statements of what knowledge is and how it is obtained references others in the local social world. 2.10 notes: The Master said: 'Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won't you know what kind of person they are?' (trans. Ames and Rosemont, p. 78). The importance of attentiveness also helps rehabilitate the Confucian notion of *xiao* (孝 family reverence) as an ethical idea. It does this somewhat unfashionably, since it does not exploit *xiao*'s association with critical and ethically respectable acts of remonstrance or resistance, but rather deepens understanding of how obedience can be a virtue.²⁶⁹ This is because obedience implies attentiveness, a kind of careful studying of how those more experienced conduct themselves, and this as a prerequisite for later meaningful achievement. It also implies avoidance of distraction, and the resisting of impulses and

²⁶⁷ For references to *guan*, see 1.11, 2.10, 4.7, 5.10, 12.20 and passim.

²⁶⁸ Similarly, 12.20 describes *shi* (scholar-apprentices or those not yet as refined as the exemplary person) as 'keen observers of demeanour', and 'thoughtful in deferring to others'.

²⁶⁹ Empathy, too, is important in the Confucian account (*shu* 恕), and taking those around one as a model for one's own conduct (*pi* 譬), although these are not discussed in detail in the *Analects*. For references to empathy, see 15.12 and 24; for references to modelling oneself on another and setting an example, see 6.30 and 13.1,2 and 6. Also, one of the four affect-based Mencian sprouts of good conduct locates the source of *ren* (仁 exemplary conduct) in something like empathy: *ce yin zhi xin* 惻隱之心 (*Mencius* 2A6) can literally be understood as a sensitivity to hidden pain. This includes sympathy as an affective response to perceived pain, but arguably also includes a more cognitive reconstruction of the other's outlook or experiences.

inclinations that would otherwise disrupt learning and prematurely determine action. This contrasts with the image of the rebellious teenagers, unwisely convinced their apprenticeship has been completed and less inclined to carefully observe.

The Confucians also recognise the need for imaginative response to create affective events. The most developed source of imaginative response can be found in *xue* (學, usually translated as learning). *Xue* is a demand for the careful absorbing of the world around, including one's historical and cultural legacy. It presents the ideal of an individual acquiring the fullest possible range of responses: intellectual, practical and artistic.²⁷⁰ Within this ideal, the Confucians emphasise the six arts (*liu yi* 六藝), including such pursuits as charioteering and arithmetic, but the primary means of augmenting the powers of imaginative response is literary. The *Analects* repeatedly insists that students study the Confucian classics,²⁷¹ and the *Book of Songs* in particular.²⁷² 13.5 makes clear that the *Book of Songs* is not merely something to be memorised and recited as ritual ornamentation.²⁷³ It is to be used practically, presumably as a primer to familiarise students with the many facets of the human condition. Further, 17.9 reads:

The Master said, 'My young friends, why don't any of you study the Songs? Reciting the Songs can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation (*guan* 觀), enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instils in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you' (trans. Ames and Rosemont, 1998, p. 206).

For the Confucians, being cultured or refined (*wen* 文) is crucial to ethical conduct.²⁷⁴ A confidence pervades the text that the variety of practical options available to the cultivated person will ensure that a response appropriate to the situation will consistently be found. This enables personal interaction to be transformed into an affective experience, but not necessarily through a faculty of deliberative or principled judgment.

²⁷⁰ See, for example, 5.28, 7.28 and 8.17. It is also closely linked to a demand for persistence (*zhi* 志) (9.28, 6.21, 9.19, 9.21, and passim), and the need to sustain an attitude of curiosity or sense of vocation.

²⁷¹ See 7.18.

²⁷² See, for example, 1.15, 2.2, and 7.18.

²⁷³ 13.15 reads: Confucius said, 'You can recite the 300 poems from the *Book of Odes*, but when you try to use them in administration, they are not effective, and in handling the outer lying regions, you cannot apply them, then even though you know a lot, what good is it?'

²⁷⁴ An anachronistic but insightful translation of *wen* would be 'liberal arts education'.

The possession of a maximally rich ‘databank’ of words, ideas and actions fits with another characteristic of the cultivated person, first described in the *Book of Changes*. This is *ji* or incipience (機/幾), sometimes translated as acting as a ‘trigger’. This personal quality refers to awareness of what is only incipient or implicit in a situation. It points to possible ‘turning points’ in an interaction that, if seized upon, can change the ‘direction’ of the situation and transform it.²⁷⁵ Such transformation starts from some particular detail about one’s interlocutor, the situation or the direction of the conversation, and leads to acting or speaking in a timely manner so as to transform the mood or introduce a qualitatively different affective experience to the interaction.²⁷⁶ One possible example of this, not taken from the text, involves humour, and the ability to draw together salient details of a situation to transform them into a humorous and memorable event. In doing so, someone with this trait perceives what is relevant to such an affective moment and acts to bring those details to the heart of the interaction.

Ji implies being ahead of others in seeing how a situation is unfolding, and is closely linked to another concept that indicates the creation of moving and memorable experience: *shen* (神). In the case of humour, for example, in addition to finding the situation funny, participants or ‘recipients’ are typically struck by the creative act, perhaps experiencing a mild surprise and admiration that the person was able to make the associations and produce the actions they did. This lack of understanding at how a person was able to accomplish these things, and the accompanying affective responses such as reverence, wonder and even delight, are described in the Confucian literature by the personal quality of *shen* (神).²⁷⁷ Sometimes translated as ‘spiritual’, or indicating a spirit-like or noumenal quality, it can be understood as simply ‘in-spirited’ or inspired, in a way perplexing to but appreciated by others.

²⁷⁵ As with many ideas that have their source in the *Book of Changes*, the lauding of this personal capacity to transform situations is present in other texts of the period. See, for example, section 22 of the *Yuandao* (原道) text (trans. Ames and Lau, 1998, p.137).

²⁷⁶ This ability to transform the mood or direction of a personal interaction also makes sense of the common image of the sage as a ‘hinge’; as the *Zhuangzi* notes, ‘when fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly’ (Watson, p35, 1996). This capacity also gives concrete meaning to the lauded value of clarity or illumination (*ming* 明).

²⁷⁷ See, for example, *Mencius* 7A13 and 7A25. 7A13 reads: ‘Where the cultivated person passes he transforms; where he resides he exerts a spirit-like influence’.

This brief sketch indicates a particularistic Confucian method for creating affective harmony, which can operate in tandem with but also, in theory, independently of the use of ritual to create such moving events. Having shown how Confucian thought is partly guided by the practical ideal I described as creating events, in the final section I will consider objections to taking such a practical ideal as an ethical ideal.

4. Objections and replies

4.1 Events as an ideal for an ethical life: objections and replies

The practical ethical ideal of creating events, deriving from the practical standpoint of personal interaction, has been presented. We have seen how it allows us to read Confucian social and ethical thought in a way that avoids some ethically troubling interpretations. Further, such a framework makes plausible the structuring of generic ethical categories around personal relationships, as described in chapter III. We must now critically assess the line of thought. Why accept the creation of social events as a practical ideal, one giving form to the basic categories of ethical life, such as obligation, motivation, justification and so forth? Here I consider some objections to what has been presented and possible replies.

The ideal of creating events invites an *epistemological objection* relating to the ethical demand to create *shared* affective experience: scepticism that a person can ever know what another is feeling, and thus that the affective experience was shared. This includes not only possible negligence in ‘checking’ but, more importantly, doubts that such knowledge can be acquired. This raises the prospect of a person proceeding unilaterally on the mistaken assumption that the interaction was delightful or rewarding for all.²⁷⁸

In reply, what has been presented is an ideal for conduct or an aim for personal interaction. The extent to which it is actually realised in practice is a further question, one that deserves further study, but this does not itself invalidate the framework. What matters is that the ideal is plausible or, to use Bernard Williams phrase for how ethical

²⁷⁸ It is also possible for affective experiences to be shared in that participants experience positive but distinct kinds of affective experiences. So, I buy a present for you, out of love, which is inappropriate or not what was really wanted; but recognising my effort you feel affection, and a sense of gratitude.

thinking should proceed when it moves away from narrow stipulations of right action, that it ‘rings true’ (2012, xv).²⁷⁹ Proof of its being realised might be difficult, but not so much so that the ideal does not have merit as a heuristic for guiding conduct. In many situations it appears that people do feel confident both that their affective experiences can be shared and that they, in the case of person-to-person interactions, can have some sense of how others are feeling. The task is not to disprove scepticism about this but to account for the basis of such confidence.

Empirical evidence suggests feelings can be shared and guide action. To return to the Confucian fascination with music, that one person is able to harmonise or ‘jam’ with another – observing not only their outward appearances and synchronised foot-tapping, but also the rapid and spontaneous selection of the appropriate notes and melody – is evidence that feelings are also being shared. Under such conditions of spontaneous coordination, it seems strange to ask what one’s fellow musician is feeling.

A further response to this objection is to hold that the inferential leaps involved in judging that an interaction has given rise to a shared experience are no more speculative than those made in other ethical theories, even if the nature of such inferential leaps are different. Such inferential leaps in other ethical frameworks include, for example, the inference that god exists in theistic ethics, or that an action produces the most overall utility, or that an action really is acceptable to everyone.

Another objection is that this account misrepresents what personal interactions are actually like and what is ethically important about them. Interactions are not always a delight; they can sometimes be unpleasant. Further, acting ethically can sometimes require that they be so. Confrontations, angry exchanges and such like, can be an important part of correcting unfairness and challenging entrenched power.

Clearly, there are situations where abrasiveness and even violence might be morally justified, such as overthrowing a cruel dictator, or self-defence in response to violent assault. Unless one is committed to non-violence or subscribes to some version of universal love (which, we should remember, some have embraced as ethical stances), creating mutually moving events in such cases appears to be an incongruent aim. It

²⁷⁹ Williams writes, ‘...It is vital not to forget another question that is to be asked both about morality and about moral philosophy, how far what we say *rings true*’ (italics in original).

should be remembered however, that *a* conception of ethical conduct is being presented, not *the* conception. Part of acting or living well involves adopting the appropriate practical standpoint (such as acting in a violent manner in the belief that the global outcome justifies the means). Furthermore, such cases do not disprove the worth of the ideal. Some cases of violent or abrasive response do not show their limits but simply contravene it. One of the normative implications of the ideal, as seen in the persistent concern to ritualise many forms of social life, is the creation of obstacles to animosity, thereby reducing abrasive and confrontational interactions. The framework offered in this chapter might thus be an ‘ethics of prevention’ rather than a method for adjudicating conflict after it has emerged. Once interpersonal attitudes sour and social trust fractures, even reasonable and genuinely impartial recommendations might be ineffective and tainted with suspicion.²⁸⁰ ‘Prevention is better than cure’ describes well both Confucian and Daoist ethical thought.

Consistent with this pre-emptive tone, the practices and skills used in realising the practical ideal also lessen practical conflict. For example, paying attention to the particularities of a person and the imaginative use of these can change the thinking of, or ‘win over’, that person. As Maria Lugones notes (2000, p. 473), qualities such as creativity and humour are often important within oppositional relationships within a community: the development of personal relationships in spite of political or ideological differences can be a vital part of social change.²⁸¹ Similarly, the focus on personal interactions and sensitivity to particulars can also be educational, leading participants to experience viewpoints not otherwise entertained. This too can prevent or ameliorate conflictual encounters.

²⁸⁰ This further illustrates the important of *ji* 幾 (incipience, acting as a hinge). The ability to make a telling intervention early in a sequence of events, before problems become manifest in entrenched emotion and attitudes, is a prominent theme in early Chinese ethical thought.

²⁸¹ Lugones is responding to those who emphasise endemic traditional social structures as the locus of ethical injustice and, specifically, Marilyn Friedman’s distinction between communities of choice and place. Lugones writes, ‘She misses the ingenuity and constant creativity in relationships among neighbours, people in families, and in relations that cannot be easily placed in either...she misses the resistant creativity with which women negotiate institutionalized life...Resistant negotiation of everyday life does not require the formation of associations that lift one from community of place, it rather constitutes life in communities of place’ (p. 473).

Another possible objection to this account is that it is not an account of ethical conduct. The practical ideal presented cannot be an ethical ideal, since ethical evaluation should be based on rational considerations, not sentiment.

If the role of reason in ethics is understood to be solely the determining of what one should will on the basis of moral principle, then this account, as presented, is deficient, since it does not require that actions be derived or tested in this way. Similarly, if reason here refers to the ideal of a disinterested ‘impartial observer’ subject, who weighs and makes commensurate multiple discrete rational considerations, and somehow ‘sees’ which consideration or set of considerations are decisive, then the account presented is deficient.

Inference guided by principle and the capacity to judge the force of a rational consideration are not the whole of rational ethical conduct, however.²⁸² Conversely, sentiment is only one part of the creation of affective events, the goal or ‘fruit’, but various cognitive skills or rational capacities are necessary to achieve this. The sensibility and practices discussed above, including sensitive perception, imagination, empathy and so on, constitute a rational method. Similarly, although the malleability of intention noted earlier in 1.4 does not depend on rational reflection, it is not irrational since its function in promoting good interactions bestows upon it a rational intelligibility. The account also features practical reasoning. Although this is better captured by the image of riding a bike rather than an impartial judge reflectively stepping back and considering options, nevertheless, the phial subject makes conscious practical ‘moves’, is aware of their effects, and changes conduct accordingly. Thus, while the object of ethical assessment on the event-based account might be experiential - the quality of interaction - and not reasons, the means of achieving it are rational.

Another objection arising from within ethical theory is the *objection based on partiality*: conduct within personal relationships is based on partiality; but genuinely ethical conduct is impartial. Therefore an account of conduct focusing on the quality of personal interaction cannot be an ethical theory. The objection focuses on at least two points. Firstly, there is the narrowness of concern. The effort and time required to develop close relationships mean that an ethical agent can realistically have them only

²⁸² See Blum (1994) for how judgment according to moral principles is itself deficient as an ethical paradigm. Problems here include the difference between grasping and assenting to a principle on the one hand, and knowing how to put it into practice and also to identify which principle is relevant in a situation.

with a few; many lie outside the range of such concern. But such limited concern violates the belief that ethical conduct derives from concern for a wider set of people than those with whom such relationships exist. Secondly, there is the objection that acting from non-instrumental concern for a particular person's good is not sufficient to justify an action. Genuinely ethical motivation is not so narrow and exclusive; it is less tied to particular individuals.

In fact, the account presented here avoids the main thrust of the partiality objection, because it links personal relationships and an account of ethical conduct in a way that is not obviously partial. To see this, we can distinguish between close personal relationships, which require partiality, and the account of personal relationships described in section 1.4 above, which are not based on intimate familiarity and care for a particular person. The account is not an ethics of close personal relationships, but of personal relationships, and so has no necessary connection to the problematic notion of partiality described here.

On the account presented here, personal interaction is guided by a concern for achieving a certain affective state in a particular social context; it is not founded on knowledge of, and commitment to, a particular person. Instead, it is directed to the 'space' in between people – the quality of interaction that arises between people – and so avoids the moral danger of partiality that close personal relationships face. This is not to deny that the goal of an attainment of a quality of interaction applies also within close personal relationships, as well as in non-close relationships. The familiarity of close relationships might also facilitate the creation of events. The account does not deny that close personal relationships are the site of ethical conduct; it merely denies that what makes such acts ethical is exclusive and intimate concern – i.e., partiality.

Further, while close relationships are by definition restrictive and exclusive (they are typically understood as a reciprocal dyadic bond), the practical ideal of achieving a quality of interaction is open with regard to who can participate. Events can be created by a group of people, as well as two who share an intimate bond. Similarly, there are no barriers arising from the time it takes to become familiar with another's character or the need to develop a sense of admiration, liking or care for that particular person. It is therefore open to those who are initially strangers. An individual life might in fact be

made up of interactions with a limited number of people, but there are no principled distinctions between an inner core of intimates and an excluded periphery; there are no formal restrictions on who may participate. This openness is thus a form of *impartiality*, since a quality of interaction can be achieved with *anyone* who enters the subject's local social world.

There are other meta-ethical considerations that support this event-based account of personal relationships as an ethical phenomenon. One appealing feature of this practical ideal is that its approach to ethical conduct begins from *a familiar and relatively secure motivation*. This is the motivational pull, or the desire to experience joy or delight. The motivation 'driving' this ideal thus differs substantially from accounts of ethical conduct that, for example, optimistically call for a motivation to treat all people as morally equally in some sense, despite the apparent inequalities and disparities of many types between people. But, though a robust and powerful motivation, it is also distinct from partial motives like those of love or affection derived from intimate connection with a select few. The distinctive feature of this ideal is that it does not attempt to summon some new and distinctively ethical motivation, but rather to redirect an existing powerful and near-universal motivation, susceptibility to delight or similar affective experiences.

Further, such redirection does not necessarily call for the neglect of what a person already finds motivating (their interests and dispositions); it requires only that subjects identify and act on what brings delight to others *and* themselves. This is still an ethical task, as it can be neglected for the sake of more immediate unilateral enjoyment. It becomes a more demanding task when no shared interests are apparent. Then attentiveness, imagination and related skills are needed to fulfil the task. Nevertheless, given the powerful intrinsic motivating pull of the experience of delight or joy, there are grounds for thinking that this is still a more easily achieved task than, for example, turning a formal theoretical account of a moral obligation into a motivation to act.

Such a picture of ethical motivation, which aims for that subset of possible actions that satisfy both oneself and one's interlocutor(s), accords with another meta-ethical principle. Michael Slote (2001), drawing on Hume's *Enquiry*, refers to this as the *requirement of a self-other balance*. Ethical conduct instantiates a balance, assessed intuitively, between actions done for oneself and actions done for the sake of other people.

One example is the normative expectation that people do their share of work for the public good or worthy causes, without making excessive effort or sacrifices.

Support for such a balance comes from the observation that while people are admired for other-regarding virtues such as kindness, they are also admired for a preparedness to defend their own interests. Virtues such as integrity or even industry exemplify such a tendency. Conversely, people are sometimes deprecated for failing to maintain a certain conception of their own good or interests, and are too ready to sacrifice their own plans or needs in order to meet the demands of other people. This avoids the worry that taking personal relationships as ethically basic leads to self-neglect or sacrifice, an objection made by some critics of care ethics. This ideal reflects the dispositions or interests of both parties. There is neither an emphasis on the other nor on oneself, but merely a search (sometimes implicit) for common ground. This normative demand might also lead, through attentiveness and imagination, to new interests and ways of acting; and this is also consistent with the demand for a self-other balance.

Linking ethical motivation and conduct to affective experiences realised through personal interaction also boasts a kind of explanatory power. It can explain conduct sometimes thought of as moral failure, re-conceiving it as ethical. It explains why people do not follow more demanding theoretical accounts of moral conduct – e.g., that actions reflect the interests of a universal community – and preserves as ethical (or merely modifying) the powerful motivations that lead to failure to comply with more idealistic conceptions.

More pessimistically but also realistically, it also explains why people often fail to challenge social or systemic injustice. Delight is a powerful motivation that can undermine motivations attached to more speculative conceptions of how the world should be. Confronted with the prospect of social restructuring and change, and the uncertainty that accompanies these, those who have reasonable grounds for protest and action find the certainty of a life structured around social events to be a more appealing choice. From one perspective, there might be disappointment that people are not as aware and as campaigning as they might be; but the account presented here makes sense of why such ‘failure’ arises. Further, there might be grounds for regarding it not as failure, but rather, in its own way, the product of an ethical outlook. It might even be rational to be guided

by the relatively secure prospect of realising affective experiences through local personal interactions, rather than seek to transcend such certainties for a more critical viewpoint. Such an ethics would certainly be modest in ambition and even conservative, but it is nevertheless a conception of ethical conduct, focused on quality of life in a local setting.

4.2 A final objection

Speaking about ethics in this way gives rise to one final objection, encountered above in section 1: this account of ethical conduct is *trivial or socially naïve*. Associating moral priority too closely with personal interaction presents a highly emasculated view of morality. Specifically, if cultivating meaningful shared social experiences is sufficient for moral conduct, then morality becomes something ignorant of wider social forces and issues. For example, it loses the capacity to criticise social structure and demand changes in public policy. But, many would argue, such guidance is a necessary feature of any form of ethical theorising.

An ethics of personal relationships as sketched here can meet this objection, however. In the final chapter I will show how an ethics of personal relationships can influence institutions and social structure, rather than merely govern lives already constrained and defined by social norms and regulations. Again, I will draw on Confucian-influenced conceptions of ethical conduct and personal relationships. To do so, however, will require drawing not on an aesthetic conception of affective harmony, as outlined in this chapter, but on an account of harmony as a stable social order arising out of practices that sustain personal relationships.

In current literature, accounts of ethical conduct that begin from personal attachments often relate personal relationships to the public realm by demanding that the public realm and social policy reflect the needs of personal relationships. For example, public policy and legal frameworks should nurture and support relationships such as those between mother and child; and must be reformed in so far as they inhibit these. I will explore a different approach, however. I will consider how the ethical value of personal relationships derives not from their being a foundational good or model, which ethical state policy must support, but from their being a site of resistance to imperfect state policy and law.

Chapter V. Personal relationships providing a stable social order

At the end of the last chapter, an objection was raised: an ethics of personal relationships is socially naïve and irrelevant. It is incapable of regulating the public realm: the social structures and laws that determine much of practical life. But any viable ethical theory must respond to such larger social issues, and indicate when reforms are required. It must make some comment on the public realm of the state, not merely the private realm of the personal.

In this chapter, I argue that an ethics of personal relationships is relevant to the public realm and can exert influence on it. The many practices that sustain personal relationships make a person's interests malleable and susceptible to coordination, resulting in a de facto social order that can resist and bring about change in public policy.

1. How personal relationships influence the public realm: possible strategies

How to argue that personal relationships have an influence on the policies of the state? One way is to take certain needs that arise in close personal relationships as ethically basic and demand that public policy reflect this. For example, the care and need integral to the parent-child relationship can be prioritised such that state policy should be a response to the needs of this relationship. Child-care is made available, while absences from work for parental reasons should be legally and institutionally recognised. Laws or policies that hinder or obstruct such attachments should be amended. Annette Baier (1987) develops this 'family first' approach by demonstrating how the family underpins the liberal state: the family is necessary for nurturing trustworthy individuals, capable of upholding the political commitments and contracts that sustain a liberal state. The assumptions of the modern contractualist state thus compel prioritising of the family.

Similarly, a Confucian-influenced ethics of personal relationships also makes normative claims on state policy, with filial piety a primary virtue. In contemporary China and Taiwan, the belief that children have a moral responsibility to care for elderly

parents informs state policy, with neglect punished by the state.²⁸³ Exploring how Confucian values can shape public policy is not the strategy pursued here, however.

A second way personal relationships can directly shape state policy is by providing ideals that guide public institutions. For example, Sybil Schwarzenbach (1996, 2009) argues that just as justice is considered a primary virtue of institutions, so political friendship can also function as an ideal to guide institutions and the policies they generate. She argues that while the ideals of liberty and equality have shaped conceptions of the modern state, the ideal of (something like) fraternity has been neglected.²⁸⁴ She notes that for Aristotle *philia* was an important political force, which (as we noted in chapter I) was a more important virtue than justice. Since, political friendship sustains justice, the former must itself be sustained by and enshrined in political institutions. The laws are to express the three Aristotelian features of friendship: its institutions make citizens aware of others in the state; dispel meanness or uncharitable attitudes in citizens about matters such as wealth redistribution or taxation; and develop practical assistance programmes, such as national service programmes in the civil realm (as happens in Germany).

Schwarzenbach's inquiry into what fundamental ideals should be used to guide the construction of state institutions and the belief that institutions should embody or express the personal is intriguing. But here I want to focus on a third strategy for relating personal relationships to the political realm.

The first two approaches take personal relationships as a model or a basis for directing state policy. Both start from some feature of personal relationships and demand that the state be ordered so as to instantiate or support this value. I argue, however, that what is distinctive about an ethics of personal relationships is not how it forms a guide for public policy and law, but how it opposes and resists them, sometimes stimulating their reform. To develop this approach, I will look at the modern Chinese phenomenon of *guanxi*, provisionally glossed as 'particularistic ties' or 'personal and social connections'.

Why approach the social structure objection through a discussion of *guanxi*, apart from illustrating a novel, third strategy for connecting personal relationships and public policy? It enriches discussions of the form a contemporary Confucian ethical life might

²⁸³ See, for example, Hong Zhang (2004).

²⁸⁴ Schwarzenbach is reluctant to use 'fraternity' on account of its gendered implications.

take, as it is separated from less appealing historical manifestations of Confucian practice. For example, there is much talk of a ‘relational self’ in contemporary Confucian discourse, but what is this? The features of *guanxi* provide a way to articulate it, and also what an ethics featuring such a self or subject might look like (although I will not explicitly discuss the relational self here). Finally, exploring the social effects of *guanxi* practices will also present us with a second gloss on the Confucian ideal of harmony – a social or communal order rather than affective experience.

Here is what I will argue. The practices constituting *guanxi* can generate a social order by coordinating people’s interests and alleviating practical conflict. This order can conflict with and resist the laws of the state. However, recognition of the value of *guanxi*-informed conduct, as well as problems with the ethical justification underpinning the authority of the state’s laws, mean that such resistance can be ethical.

2: What is *guanxi*?

‘*Guanxi*’ is a familiar and important term in contemporary China and other Confucian-influenced East Asian countries. The Anthropologist Chiao Chien writes,

This ‘*guanxi* network’ has been in existence for a long time, but in contemporary mainland China, it is of unprecedented importance. Therefore, it is the first subject which one must understand in the study of mainland Chinese society, especially in the cities (1982, p. 354).

Sociologist Ambrose Yeo-chi King offers a similar appraisal.²⁸⁵ He quotes a former senior reporter at China’s most prominent newspaper, the People’s Daily, whose views on *guanxi* aptly foreshadow the discussion to follow:

In Ping county, you simply cannot clearly figure out the *guanxi* (personal relations) among people. It seems that in everyone’s body there is a particular switch. If you touch a person, it will unexpectedly affect a large number of persons...There are complicated and overlapping relations between and among people, weaving a thick and tight social web. Whatever ‘isms’ or principles, whatever policies or program guidances, as soon as they touch this social web, they lose their function immediately, just like being suddenly electrocuted. (Quoted in King, 1991, pp. 63-4)

²⁸⁵ Similarly, King notes, ‘...No one who has lived in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong or any other overseas Chinese society could be totally unaware of a social phenomenon called *guanxi* (personal relationship). It is no exaggeration to say that *guanxi*, *renqing* [which King translates as human obligation] and *mianzi* [face] are key sociocultural concepts to the understanding of Chinese social structure. Indeed, these sociocultural concepts are part of the essential “stock knowledge”...of Chinese adults in their management of everyday life’ (1991, p.63).

However, despite its social importance, defining *guanxi* is difficult and there are several ways of conceptualising it.²⁸⁶ Contemporary theorists offer several different English translations: ‘interpersonal connections’ (Fan, 2002), ‘particularistic ties’ (Jacobs, 1979), ‘friendship’ (Pye, 1982), ‘reciprocal exchange’ (Hwang, 1987), and ‘social capital’ (Butterfield, 1983). Mindful that ‘*guanxi*’ does not obviously refer to a single entity but to a series of related practices and ideas that defy neat conceptualisation, some three salient features might be noted to aid discussion.

First, *guanxi* involves a consciousness of or attempt to identify some form of commonality or shared association between two people. The awareness or identification of such a bond subsequently influences conduct towards that person. Such commonality might be identified as a biological or family tie, broadly construed to include extended family, a shared hometown or university, or even ‘friend of a friend’ or ‘co-worker of an old classmate’.²⁸⁷ This disposition or tendency reflects the classic Confucian doctrine of the five cardinal relationships (五倫 *wulun*), discussed in chapter III.

Guanxi also involves *the developing or emergence of a personal relationship* – regardless of whether that relationship is consciously and formally described.²⁸⁸ This might be done deliberately – as when one actively plans to get to know another – or happen through everyday interaction, as when people interact regularly without first recognising any formal connection. The practices of *guanxi* constitute personal relationships, since they involve a disposition to establish a basis of familiarity with others, and a sensitivity to personal particulars and circumstances. Even if such relationships are not always close, the familiarity developed through such interaction

²⁸⁶ The Chinese characters making up the term are *guan* (關) and *xi* (係). The *Cihai* dictionary offers two particularly relevant meanings of *guan*: a *connection* and a *gateway or pass* (which might be opened or guarded strategically). *Xi* originally meant silk thread, signifying a drawing together and binding. The suggestiveness of these two characters helps to locate the meaning of the modern term within broad parameters, indicating both being bound and doorways or openings.

²⁸⁷ For example, Mayfair Yang’s book-length study of *guanxi* tells how one such relationship of familiarity was established. A man visits a museum that has closed for the day and is refused entry, but recognises the gatekeeper as an associate of his uncle. Their connection established, the man is able to enter the museum despite it being closed to the public and the two exchange contact information (1994, p. 124).

²⁸⁸ Recalling the discussion of chapter I and the previous chapter, what makes a relationship *personal* is not easily specified since it is not limited to one feature, such as liking or loving the other. This reflects the complexity of the ways in which *guanxi* are sustained – one could have a personal relationship of *guanxi* with someone one did not particularly like, although an absence of mutual liking might restrict how this relationship would develop.

influences a person's conduct, making a person more interested in, and receptive to, the other's suggestions, and more willing to help.²⁸⁹

Third, *guanxi* can also be understood in terms of *constitutive practices and norms*. These include: reciprocal assistance; the instrumental use of others in order to secure goods and satisfy needs; the exchange of gifts and favours; and avoidance of action that makes the other person look inadequate, mean, of bad character, etc, in front of other people. I discuss these below. Such practices are typically maintained over time, and lead to a degree of affective or *emotional involvement* in the life of another, and a corresponding change in motivations and disposition.

Other features associated with *guanxi* include a diffuse sense of obligation to respond to the interests or needs of another (distinct from defined social obligations such as parents caring for young child), a sense of indebtedness for kindnesses received, the calculation of profit and loss through exchanges with another, awareness of convention or relevant forms of propriety, and trust (that others will keep their word, will show the appropriate form of preference, etc).²⁹⁰ My aim is not to exhaustively define *guanxi*, however, but to describe some of these features, and integrate them into an ethical framework that has relevance to our guiding question: how personal relationship (now understood as a species of *guanxi*) can be both the grounds of ethical living and also challenge and redirect state policy.

One clarification is necessary. There is much debate over whether *guanxi* is a distinctive cultural phenomenon, the result of certain specific historical and economic forces or a quite generic social phenomenon that arises in many societies.²⁹¹ Opinions are divided in the literature. *Guanxi* has been understood as generic practices, such as gift-giving and reciprocal practical help, independent of any cultural or historical viewpoint

²⁸⁹ This accords with social psychology research that suggests the key variable in developing friendship is not a particular characteristic of a person but propinquity – i.e., proximity and prolonged exposure. See Newcomb (1956), Nahemow and Lawton (1975).

²⁹⁰ Mayfair Yang's summary of *guanxi* reads, '*Guanxixue* (the suffix 'xue' indicates the 'art' or 'study' of *guanxi*) involves the exchange of gifts, favours and banquets; the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness. What informs these practices and their native descriptions is the conception of the primacy and binding power of personal relationships and their importance in meeting the needs and desires of everyday life' (1994, p. 6).

²⁹¹ For example, Standifird and Marshall claim, '*Guanxi* does not appear to be unique, and in fact it exists to some extent in every human society' (2000, p.22). For a list of studies of *guanxi*-like phenomenon in countries other than China, see Yang (1994, p.7).

and analogous to social networking in liberal free-market democracies, and also old boys' networks. Others see *guanxi* as a product of particular historical and economic forces, particularly the central command economies of a Communist regime (Guthrie 2004). Others insist that *guanxi* has its roots in a distinctive intellectual and social tradition – Confucianism (King, 1991). Others offer a more nuanced view: *guanxi* is neither the product of a particular social and intellectual tradition, nor merely the causal product of economic forces, but does draw on common cultural practices – shared social meanings deriving from a shared form of life (Kipnis, 1997).

While acknowledging this plurality of views, my own approach draws on associations between *guanxi* and Confucian social philosophy.²⁹² However, no claim of cultural essentialism – that *guanxi* somehow defines Chineseness – is made. I treat the features of *guanxi* analytically, in a way that can be discussed independently of any particular historical or cultural tradition. Treating *guanxi* as an ethical discourse involves some generalisations about *guanxi*. But I believe these are plausible representations of *guanxi*, and might provide novel insight into theories of ethical conduct.

3. A puzzle about *guanxi*

How then are we to represent *guanxi* in order to explicate its relation to the public realm and the state? We find two very different accounts of *guanxi* in contemporary discussion. On the one hand, *guanxi* is a synonym for corruption and nepotism and undermines civil society.²⁹³ The pursuit of social goods through *guanxi* leads to a socially divisive restriction of social opportunity, the antithesis of the generalised personal concern integral to civil society. On the other hand, *guanxi* appears as a source of interpersonal trust within a community, underpinning all manner of social and business transactions, and underpinning a culture of civility (Otis and Lo, 2003). How might this tension be resolved?

²⁹² For a detailed account of how *guanxi* can be traced back to early Confucianism, see Mayfair Yang (1994, pp. 216-44).

²⁹³ Su and Littlefield write, '*Guanxi*...in today's China is synonymous with bureaucratic corruption or bribery' (2001, p. 199). Similarly, Zhang Yefu (1991), offering an orthodox government analysis, insists that *guanxi* arises because of poverty, is despised by people and involves a humiliating ingratiation to secure what are often trivial goods.

I suggest that the conflict arises because the two accounts take different aspects of *guanxi* practice to be its core characteristics; in effect, two different forms of *guanxi* are identified. What we must do is examine the relationship of each type to policies and regulations issued by the state. Let us begin with the *guanxi* that is the object of negative assessment. Despite the rhetoric of cronyism, I argue that under certain conditions it can offer ethically justifiable resistance to state policy.

4. Instrumental *guanxi*

Perhaps the simplest way to understand *guanxi* is as the reciprocal use of personal attachments to secure desired ends or goods. This is sometimes called ‘favour-seeking *guanxi*’ (Su and Littlefield, 2001), but I refer to this type as *instrumental guanxi*. It features a degree of personal regard and affection, and is a long-term reciprocal relationship, thereby differentiating it from fee-for-service bribery. Such reciprocity does not require that the repayment of another’s help happen immediately or within a fixed timeframe. Instrumental *guanxi*’s distinguishing feature, however, is the skilful use of one’s relationships to satisfy personal interests, however these are understood by the individual. The ends or goods sought vary. They might be basic materials or consumer goods, such as difficult-to-obtain theatre tickets; a place at a good school for a child; or a business or export licence.²⁹⁴

It might be objected that such a relationship cannot provide ethical resistance to the state as it is not an ethical relationship: it involves breaking the law and also using people as means not ends. However, there can be bad laws such that disobeying them is sometimes justified. More interestingly, *guanxi* relationships suggest that the clear logical distinction between treating people as ends and as means is too simplistic, failing to represent the experiences of personal relationships. As many *guanxi* observers note, a crucial feature of such personal relationships is the merging of the affective and

²⁹⁴ Yang (1994, p.4) offers an example of such *guanxi*. An interviewee describes his efforts to help a doctor acquaintance find a rare herbal medicine, which involved utilising his entire network of contacts. The man was eventually directed to a friend of a friend who wrote a personal letter that was taken to a specialist doctor who finally issued a prescription for the medicine. After a day of frantic scurrying around Beijing, the man was able to present the herbal ingredient to his doctor acquaintance. This doctor was also, it transpires, probably securing the medicine as a service for someone else. The interviewee did not do this for a specific goal, but merely noted that ‘now the doctor owes me something. I can just put it on the shelf for four or five years, until I need something, and then I just go and reclaim it’ (p.4).

instrumental aspects, in a way that challenges the heightened sensitivity in more individualistic ethics to any possible mixing of the two motives. The use of others involves feelings of gratitude and indebtedness that bind people, while affective commitments must be secured by material manifestations of these feelings, as happens by gift-giving or doing favours.

5. Instrumental *guanxi* and ethical resistance to the state

How can instrumental *guanxi* be understood as providing some kind of ethical resistance to the state? This requires first saying something about a state. Consider the Hobbesian account of the state. This arises in response to people's need for security, with self-interested contractors giving up certain freedoms to an authority in return for this. The state can then be described as some kind of centralised and (conditionally) legitimate authority, such as a body of lawmakers or monarch, which issues laws or policies that apply to all subjects of that state. In addition, it exercises a monopoly on the use of force (including the relevant legal institutions such as police and the courts) regarding those laws and policies. In the liberal democratic and socialist traditions, these laws are intended to reflect the interests of all such subjects, including people's interest in securing a certain level of material well-being and social opportunity (understood as greater control over how to live, one's occupation, etc). Given this implicit contract, we might say that the state has an ethical duty to provide subjects with certain material goods and social opportunities.²⁹⁵

Given this account of the state then instrumental *guanxi* can, I suggest, constitute ethical resistance to the policies and laws of the state, *under certain conditions*. Specifically, the state can fail in its ethical duty to provide certain basic goods and opportunities, and instrumental *guanxi* provide an alternative method for obtaining what it is reasonable for people to seek. Such goods might include slightly more or better food, better employment or education.²⁹⁶ Pursuing *guanxi* under such conditions might violate

²⁹⁵ This is, of course, a highly idealised picture of the ideal state, and a contested one. I consider other conceptions of the state below.

²⁹⁶ What counts as a reasonable level of well-being is difficult to specify, and there might not be a uniform standard. One rough way of expressing this idea is as the kinds of goods for which people leave a state to search for, i.e., legally or otherwise emigrate.

the laws and so undermine or oppose the state, yet ethical priority lie with the practices of *guanxi*.²⁹⁷ An example from contemporary China is the use of *guanxi* to secure better housing. This acquisition was considered a reasonable aim by most subjects of the state, but laws and bureaucratic procedures that structured the public realm made this difficult to obtain if not impossible.²⁹⁸

Here then we find one way in which an ethics of personal relationships can oppose and resist the public policy and laws in a way that can be regarded as ethical. It thus shows how an ethics of personal relationships is not confined to a limited private realm, irrelevant to political questions.

There is a problem with this solution, however. Namely, *guanxi* appears ethical because of the failure of the state, primarily in its failure to provide basic goods and, derivatively, its economic institutions and organisation. The implication however, is that if the state were to stop failing and be better organised then the conditions which contingently justified instrumental *guanxi* would be removed. The state – its organisation and laws – can change, and better supply a reasonable level of well-being and social opportunity. This is exactly what has happened in post-1980, reform-era China. The social regulations and laws of the command economy era were replaced by laws that, arguably, were able to fulfil what we described as an ethical duty of the state. New laws and social institutions orientated around the free market have created social opportunities and made available goods and services that were not available under the old state. The state is now able to provide to subjects what they previously relied on instrumental *guanxi* to obtain, thus removing the justification for instrumental *guanxi*.

Further, an increase in goods and opportunities provided by the state make clear how instrumental *guanxi* practices can lead to *unethical* conduct. This is because the idealised state contains an ethical commitment to impartiality, while instrumental *guanxi* does not. This is the commitment of law-makers both to take account of the interests of all subject to the law and also to avoid bias in weighing those interests when issuing laws.

²⁹⁷ Instrumental *guanxi* could be deployed in unethical ways, even under this problematic form of state. For example, in securing goods or ends that could not reasonably constitute basic material well-being. But the point here is to show only how it *could* be considered ethical, given certain forms of public organisation and structure.

²⁹⁸ Yang (1994, pp. 179-88) provides a detailed discussion of how the 1980s Chinese socialist state made the acquisition of housing conditional upon demonstration of specific socialist attributes, thereby exerting a possibly objectionable form of power and control over its subjects.

Such procedural impartiality is the justificatory grounds of its laws.²⁹⁹ In contrast, instrumental *guanxi* practices do not require that the practitioners conceive of their actions in terms of all peoples' interests or even the public interest. Its vision is confined to the interests of particular people in the *guanxi* network. Within a restructured state presenting greater opportunities to acquire material goods and social opportunity, instrumental *guanxi* seems only to secure greater private, personal enrichment – albeit shared among participants of a *guanxi* network. This insensitivity to, or even wilful disregard of, the relation of narrow personal interest to the interests of all members of society is what makes instrumental *guanxi* ethically problematic. What is aimed at can clearly be in conflict with what is required by the broader interest, but instrumental *guanxi* relations show little interest in bridging this divide. On this account, the locus of ethical justification is transferred to the state.

This account explains the concern about *guanxi* practices in contemporary China; and even when no law is broken instrumental *guanxi* remain ethically objectionable. It might also be true that Confucian social ethics is partly responsible for the phenomenon of *guanxi*. Implicit in this analysis is thus a narrative that suggests that *guanxi* will disappear from China as economic and political reforms develop, and that this will in some sense also be the discarding of problematic Confucian ethics.³⁰⁰ The priority of the public and the personal (*guanxi*) have been reversed, and *guanxi* is no longer a site of ethical resistance to the policies of the state.

Should conduct directed predominantly by *guanxi* be considered unethical? If the above account is correct, then one might expect *guanxi* practices to be permissible only within an ethical framework defined by the public realm, such as networking in the business world within strict guidelines. The complexity of *guanxi* alluded to earlier, however, should make us wary of any all-inclusive judgment about *guanxi*. There is no single agreed theoretical formulation of *guanxi*.³⁰¹ When we look at other features of *guanxi* and consider how they guide conduct then, I believe, they do constitute a form of

²⁹⁹ See Marilyn Friedman (2000) for a helpful discussion of impartiality, including a critical discussion of how this ideal functions in the political realm.

³⁰⁰ Guthrie (1998), for example, argues that the practices of *guanxi* in China are in decline.

³⁰¹ As Mayfair Yang notes, '*Guanxixue* is at heart ambiguous and multidimensional, that different readings of it are possible, indeed, inevitable' (1994, p. 173). Other conceptions of *guanxi* not discussed here are: an example of class privileges and official corruption, and a facilitator for market transactions (p.173).

ethical resistance to the state. This leads us to the second and more positive assessment of *guanxi* noted above. I will call this type of *guanxi sensibility or dispositional guanxi*.

6. Rehabilitating *guanxi*: sensibility *guanxi* as a form of ethical conduct

Any attempt to distinguish two forms of *guanxi* is subject to the clarification that both share a common core of features, as described above. Different forms of *guanxi* are not easily distinguished in practice, and their differences are partly a matter of emphasis or differences of degree. That said, the operative distinction concerns different approaches to a person's 'interest' represented by the two *guanxi* types. Instrumental *guanxi* is characterised by the instrumental use of personal relationships to secure existing interests; in sensibility *guanxi* the situation is reversed: personal relationships are central to determining a person's interests.³⁰² The term 'interest' here is to be understood broadly, to include dispositions to act, conscious motives, and even a person's conception of his or her own interests. Sensibility *guanxi* practice might affect any combination of these and I use the term 'interest' broadly to reflect this.

This distinction or re-conceptualising has a basis in the Confucian tradition.³⁰³ Instrumental *guanxi* practices proceed from a salient sense of self-interest: the sense that certain ways of acting or goods are advantageous to oneself. An awareness of what is in one's interests is what stimulates engagement in relationships, sometimes opportunistically, and the ethically troubling implications of this were noted above. But, assuming that *guanxi* is at least partly rooted in Confucian social ethics as many commentators have claimed (King 1991, Yang 1994), this cannot be the whole story of *guanxi*. Consider the dominant ethical ideal in the Confucian tradition, expressed in the *Daxue* (usually translated as the Great Learning): social order (harmony) is achieved by embodying, reflecting or responding to the actions and interests of those around one's

³⁰² This distinction is related to a distinction in the literature between rural and urban forms of *Guanxi* (Yang, 1994, Kipnis, 1997). Urban *guanxi* are portrayed as involving greater instrumental use of others. In rural communities, *ganqing* (emotional commitment in long-standing and intimate social bonds) and more ritualised gift-giving are more prominent (Yang 1994, pp. 72-5; and Kipnis, 1997, introduction). Also some Chinese interviewees suggested instrumental *guanxi* was more common among men while the more affect-based *guanxi* was typical of women (Yang, 1994, p. 320).

³⁰³ This assumes that Confucian social and ethical thought has some bearing on modern *guanxi* practice. As noted above this is a contested claim, but several *guanxi* theorists support it, including Yang (1994, p. 149; pp. 216-53) and King (1991).

person, as these extend outwards from oneself into an ever-wider community. A person whose actions reflect the interests of the wider set of relationships in which they are immersed is granted the exalted status of 仁 *ren*, indicating authority. Thus the Confucian ethical vision would not endorse action guided by a narrow conception of personal interest, where interests precede relationships, which are used primarily instrumentally.

A second implication of this ethical model, important in what follows, is that social and even political authority begin with attention to what is near at hand and only then proceed to more extended or abstract forms of authority. This is a key characteristic of the Confucian ideal of sagehood. Social order starts from personal relationships and the sensibilities needed for these, and not institutions and laws produced centrally.

A more convincing explanation of instrumental *guanxi* is that they are parasitic on sensibility *guanxi* (described below). It makes use of the sensibility created by the historical normative ideal of cultivating and sustaining personal relationships, but does so for the sake of narrower interests that exhibit reduced sensitivity to others' interests.

So what is this alternative conception of *guanxi* like, such that it both reflects the influence of Classical Confucian ethics and also exerts an ethical influence on the state policy? As noted above, sensibility *guanxi* is best understood as a set of practices and processes through which a subject's conception of his or her interests are created, modified or discarded. As anthropologist Andrew Kipnis puts it in his study of *guanxi*, personal relationships 'involve a dialectic of making and being made' (1997, p. 121); or, we might add, of influencing and being influenced. Stated another way, sensibility *guanxi* practices involve the cultivation of a personal sensibility, whereby a *person's sense of his or her own interests becomes malleable*. Engagement in such relationships reduces the extent to which a subject identifies with a rigid set of interests, and thus the ease with which these can be distinguished from and perceived as being in conflict with the interests of other people. Understanding personal interest in this way means that, for example, a request for practical assistance typically strikes the subject less as impinging on his or her interests and more as creating a new interest for them. There are still individuating conceptions of one's own interests, of course, and the individual whose distinctive projects are not erased. It is merely a question of differences of degree. But

differences of degree might be enough for a communal social life to take on a very different shape or dynamic.

Such ordering and reordering of interests is possible because the subject of sensibility *guanxi* is orientated towards a series of practices. What kinds of practices ensure such ongoing forming and reforming of a person's conception of her interests? One of these was noted in chapter III – the sense of serial personal obligation of this type of ethical subject. In what follows, I present some of the characteristic mechanisms of *guanxi* by which a subject's sense of its interests are rendered malleable. Here I will focus only on a few prominent practices. Still, this will be sufficient to convey how a malleability of interest is not only achieved but also sustained.

7. The Practices of sensibility *guanxi*

7.1 Fictive kinship relations

Modern *guanxi* practices make use of fictive kinship terms to develop a basis for familiarity and affection for those one meets. For example, in Chinese factories younger or newly arrived female workers often use familial terms like *jie* (姐 older sister) in interactions with more experienced female workers or management.³⁰⁴ This enables them to orientate themselves in a new environment and develop valued personal connections. The term '*jie*' has significant emotion content, linked as it is with experiences of family life, and calls forth certain sentiments and feelings of respect on the part of the speaker. But it also conveys information to the listener and, arguably, incites a sense of responsibility towards the speaker.³⁰⁵ The process of identifying others and acting on the basis of general social categories might be considered objectionable, as a failure to perceive the individual and instead treat them as a generic type. But fictive kinship terms are more important for the attitudes they encode and as a means to encourage familiarisation and develop a relationship. Their connection to fixed social roles is muted,

³⁰⁴ Yang 1994, p. 114.

³⁰⁵ This example has been understood as a cynical exploitation of family feeling to maintain organisational hierarchy and a compliant labour force. But as Yang points out (1994, p. 174, n1), such an analysis ignores the fact that it is also a strategy, repeated in other uses of *guanxi*, for influencing a manager and generating greater commitment to the workers.

and such monikers equally draw on imagination and attention to personal particulars.³⁰⁶

7.2. Gift-giving

One of the most widely discussed practices of *guanxi* is gift giving.³⁰⁷ In the Chinese context, the ubiquity of giving gifts (禮物 *liwu*) is understood to derive from earlier ritual practices (禮 *li*) that stipulated the exchange of gifts to ‘reproduce’ or confirm existing ties and affections, as when a new wife moved in with the husband’s family and was presented by each family member with a red envelope containing money.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which gifts influence people’s interests is by being a manifestation or embodiment of sentiment. As many anthropologists have observed (Marcel Mauss, 1967; Mayfair Yang, 1994; Andrew Kipnis, 1997), a gift is not simply the expression of a spontaneous and authentic inner feeling for another person that arises prior to the gift. Its affective force partly derives from the social practices within which the gift-giving arises. Shared social understandings and recognised social relationships are the conditions that make possible the affective power of the gift, and gift-giving draws skilfully on these to influence dispositions and interests (both the recipient(s’) and others’ involved in the act of the giving). For example, a generous wedding gift has additional affective force, beyond its basic meaning as a wedding gift, because it exceeds conventional expectation and creates what Bourdieu called ‘social capital’. In such ways, gift-giving builds and sustains networks of personal ties. Others are brought under a person’s influence through giving, while one in turn is tied to others as a recipient.

Gift giving generates charismatic social influence because of the risk undertaken by the giver and the social prestige thereby derived. Unlike contractual or explicitly monetised exchanges, the gift-giver might never receive anything in return - relationships change, people lose contact and so on. Acting under such conditions thus bestows prestige, a perception of generosity, on the giver - another form of interpersonal influence.

Gift-giving also sustains obligation. Typically, it creates a sense of obligation in the recipient, most obviously to reciprocate, but it also creates obligation and expresses

³⁰⁶ As Bourdieu notes, fictive kinship practices are distinct from ‘official’ or genealogical kinship uses, since the latter are claims to legitimate authority within a fixed social order of relationships (1977, p.34).

³⁰⁷ The role of gift giving and the gift economy in creating social order is treated extensively in anthropological and sociological literature. See in particular Mauss (1967) and Bourdieu (1977).

responsibility on the part of the giver.³⁰⁸ The relationship is not so crude, however. Giving a gift to someone does not mean establishing a relationship with them. It requires a context or occasion that makes the gift, and its expression of feeling, intelligible and constitutes a reason for accepting it. Similarly, when a gift is given from transparently calculating motives, and is perceived as lacking in feeling, it can reasonably be rejected.³⁰⁹

It might be objected that the influence of gift-giving on a person's interests is or should be limited, because genuine social obligation arises only when an agent voluntarily consents to take part in an exchange. People can insist (based on seemingly transparent feelings) that they do not want a gift or, if they had no opportunity to decline in advance, that they have no obligation to reciprocate. Genuine obligation in such situations might be thought to arise from a duty of non-inference or to uphold impersonal respect, while one's interests remain firmly under one's voluntary control. But this response views gift giving too simplistically and, to recall the discussion in chapter III, obligation too - particularly the blurred distinction between obligation based on rational consent and social obligation.³¹⁰

The assertion that the only true obligation is that based on voluntary rational consent is not easily refuted. The practice, along with an exaggerated conception of individual moral responsibility, might be part of what Bernard Williams calls a 'rationalistic metaphysics of morality' (1993, p. 159), with its origin in the European Enlightenment. Regardless, it is possible to outline some of the nuances of gift-giving, so that *guanxi* subjects appear intelligible and reasonable.

First, the meaning of declining a gift is not exhausted by recognising an exercise of informed voluntary choice. Declining has other meanings. It is also a comment on a person's character. It might, for example, be understood as insensitivity to the feelings of

³⁰⁸ Kipnis (1997, p.59; p.71) provides the example of female relatives presenting eggs to a female family member who has just given birth. Eggs are symbolically (and perhaps medically) associated with recovery after childbirth, and the gift symbolises the commitment to provide support whenever required in the future.

³⁰⁹ Yang (1994, pp. 62-3).

³¹⁰ One possible response is to resist the offer of a gift several times and only then accept. The recipient could then claim a kind of coercion. They thus accepted the gift only to placate the other person, avoid a scene, etc. Coercion frees them from any obligation to reciprocate. In fact, however, this response makes it harder to understand the practice of giving and receiving gifts in terms of a simple choice of an individual agent. Ambiguity arises because the recipient could have continued to refuse; and in accepting, a form of consent was given. How much pestering constitutes coercion is difficult to specify.

others, most notably the giver (despite protestations from the refuser to the contrary, no doubt). It might also show a reluctance to engage in cooperative behaviour with others, and a lack of interest in conventional norms that others find valuable. The intended recipient's responses become significant when a refusal indicates how future interactions will go; people's subsequent attitude to the refuser can change, making them less willing to offer assistance in the future, avoid him or her, and so on. While actual outcomes can only be known on a case-by-case basis, the point is that the meaning of declining a gift is not entirely under the putative recipient's control.

Doubts that gift-giving should be allowed to influence a person's interests also arise from misunderstanding of the obligation involved. Even if accepting a gift means placing oneself under a debt to another, to reciprocate, it is not clear this implies any objectionable subservience or constraint. This is because what reciprocity amounts to in gift giving is unclear. To repay a gift too quickly and to repay in exact kind, though it would remove a debt, is to misunderstand the nature of gift-giving, and even to cause insult. Indeed, it is important that the subjective experience of giving a gift does not involve conscious thought of reciprocity; otherwise it is merely a loan. More importantly, because it is uncertain when and in what form a gift might be repaid, it is far from clear that any obligation implicit in accepting a gift threatens meaningful freedom.

7.3 Face

To understand the complex social practice of face,³¹¹ an analogy with the physical human face is helpful. As Chung Cheng-ying (1986) suggests, the human visage (*lian* 臉 in Chinese, also a word for the abstract sense of face) is a public surface, highly visible to others and the means by which a person is identified. If disfigured other people might view and respond differently to it; a person might conceal or hide such a face. By analogy then, the abstract concept of face refers to the social standing or prestige of a person who 'faces' others.³¹²

³¹¹ Face is found in many cultures, although several writers have suggested it is particularly developed in China, (e.g., Yang, 1994, p. 140). Kipnis (1995) offers a very helpful history of Western constructions of 'Chinese' notions of face. As he points out, the term to 'lose face' entered the English language as a translation of the Chinese *diulian* (丟臉).

³¹² This can be seen explicitly in the concern with seating at formal banquets; at least in China (Kipnis 1997), care is taken to choose who sits at the head of the (round) table, who faces whom, and there is much deference regarding who sits in the more prestigious places.

Another helpful metaphor is derived from a second Chinese word for face, *mianzi* (面子).³¹³ *Mianzi* literally means a surface and, by extension, surface area. Thus the concept of face can also be approached by thinking of how widely people can extend themselves. The larger a person's 'surface area', the greater his or her social influence. When broad enough, such influence can even challenge state power, as when celebrities spearhead challenges to state policy.

At the risk of over-simplification, face might be understood as a concern for what other people think of oneself. This includes the expectation that others accord to oneself the recognition one believes fitting for oneself, but also sensitivity to how they perceive oneself. More objectively, face also refers to the prestige or esteem that other people accord to a person, irrespective of the subjective expectation. It also includes opportunities to demonstrate excellence and avoid humiliation. How can face direct conduct, and why might it be reasonable to be influenced by it? Let us start with an example of one of the earliest recorded uses of face.

The *Shiji* (*The Records of the Grand Historian*)³¹⁴ describes a fight for control after the downfall of the Qin empire in 207AD, between Xiang Yu and Liu Bang. The victorious Liu Bang established what became the Han Dynasty. Xiang Yu, defeated, fled the final battle with a few cavalry, and was advised to escape to his native place of Jiang Dong where he could safely regroup. He replied, however, 'I came with eight thousand youths from Jiang Dong. If I return defeated and alone, though the elders of Qiang Dong should pity me and make me their king, with what face (*mianmu* 面目) could I see them?' Xiang Yu eventually committed suicide.

³¹³ The meanings of these two Chinese terms for face, *lian* and *mianzi* is debated. Many regard them as referring to different aspects of face, but disagree about how to fix this distinction. Hsien Chin Hu (1944) understands *lian* as the public perception and judgment of a person's moral character, while *mianzi* refers to social standing, accumulated through generosity, wealth, social position and so on. For Kipnis (1995) *lian* is what is directly knowable about a person (recent successes and failures, etc) while *mianzi* refers abstractly to the reach of social contacts and influence. I do not distinguish these two terms here, since my purpose is to highlight how the features of face collectively influence and redirect conduct.

³¹⁴ Xiang Yu chapter; the *Shiji* details in semi-mythical form the key events of earlier Chinese history. Another early use of face occurs in a *Guanzi* story about Duke Huan of Qi and his prime minister Guan Zhong. On his deathbed Guan Zhong implored his ruler to dismiss certain people from court in order to maintain a stable rule; Duke Huan promised to do so but then did not. He subsequently lost control of his kingdom and was reduced to starvation. Recalling his former prime minister's advice, he said, 'If the dead have no consciousness, it will be all right. But if they should have consciousness, what face (*mianmu* 面目) would I have to see [him] under the ground?'

This passage highlights some important aspects of face. It conveys the power of motivations derived from sensitivity to how failure or success are viewed by familiar others. In Xiang Yu's case, his undertaking to lead the youths of Qiang Dong to victory on behalf of his homeland, and the subsequent failure, had profound consequences. According to one view of individual responsibility, Xiang Yu could easily be absolved of blame for his military failure: success or failure in battle is frequently beyond the individual's control and nothing suggests his negligence or incompetence. Yet, although Xiang Yu absolves himself of *responsibility* by claiming the outcome as fate or destiny, he still feels a loss of face, a sense of being *blameworthy*. A sense of one's standing with others is more effective in determining conduct than a conception of limited and voluntary responsibility.

Away from the arena of martial honour, face exerts influence in more everyday contexts. It generates caution in declarations of ability, means or intent – this was Xiang Yu's problem.³¹⁵ But a loss of face can occur even without a declaration to act or a claim to status. Face includes a degree of compulsion to help when called upon in cases of contingency or sudden need, even where the relationship is not a close one and neither prior consent nor reciprocal exchange govern the act. Being able to help constitutes a gain in prestige but failure means a loss of face. For example, an acquaintance might contact one regarding a friend of theirs visiting from out of town and hoping to find a place to stay. Being unable to provide a room would not amount to an ethical violation or transgression but does lead to a loss of social standing.³¹⁶ In such everyday instances of face-sensitive conduct, appeal to a conception of limited personal responsibility is muted.

Face can also compel the avoidance of actions that openly convey hostility or strongly negative judgments. This is partly due to sensitivity to the social standing of the interlocutor, but relates also to a subject's own social standing. As Hu observes (1944, p. 47), those occupying positions of responsibility or leadership are less able to openly express anger or contempt, since this informs opinion of their own character and

³¹⁵ Reticence is also a key value in the *Analects*: being slow to speak or acting first and only then speaking is mentioned approvingly by the historical Confucius (1.14 and passim).

³¹⁶ A middle-aged skilled worker interviewed by Yang (1994, p. 141) explained such conduct as, '...face gives you social status, others will respect you and be willing to enter into social relationships with you.'

reliability. A similar practice is establishing in advance and by indirect means whether a request is likely to be accepted, avoiding the loss of (both parties') face of a direct refusal.

Another way in which face influences people's sense of their interests is through the collective ownership of successes and failures. If a child fails at school then, as knowledge of this circulates, the family as a whole lose prestige and standing (Kipnis 1995). The reverse also holds, as when a child enters a prestigious university. Face in this sense induces a greater sense of responsibility for those one is connected to and with whom one is perceived as sharing a common origin or responsibility.

Face also brings the ability to leverage one's social standing to exert influence on those associated with oneself. It is possible to get others to start, stop or refrain from doing something through an appeal to one's own social standing. A father or company manager might stop sons or employees fighting, by pointing out to them the effects of their actions on his social standing. Kipnis (1995) offers the example of a company section chief whose wife visited his workplace in order to quarrel publicly with him, and pressure him to comply with her demands. In so far as the section chief was unable to prevent such open confrontation with family, company employees lost confidence in his ability to manage them.

An extract from Mao Zedong's writings reveals another dimension of face's practical influence. Mao describes one particular method of Chinese peasants in attacking landlords and overturning the traditional feudal order:

'A tall paper hat is stuck on the head of one of the local tyrants or evil gentry, bearing the words "Local tyrant so-and-so" or "So-and-so of the evil gentry." He is led by a rope and escorted with big crowds in front and behind. Sometimes brass gongs are beaten and flags waved to attract people's attention. This form of punishment more than any other makes the local tyrants and evil gentry tremble. Anyone who has once been crowned with a tall paper hat loses face altogether and can never again hold up his head (*zuo buqi ren* 做不起人)' (Mao, 1964, p. 37, cited in Kipnis, 1995, p. 128).

The 'evil gentry' had to 'altogether lose' their face (*yanmian* 顏面) because this is what constituted their social power. This belief in the power of face was still important 50 years later, during China's Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. Here, too, losing face transformed a person into a social outcast. As Kipnis notes of that revolution, 'In many cases former friends and neighbours refused for extended periods to associate with crowning victims. Victims were without *lian* [face] to see people, and some committed suicide' (p. 128).

It is easy to dismiss such scenes as comical but ultimately generic cases of psychological abuse. But this is to miss two important points about face. Evidently, a person's status or self-worth can be challenged publicly by one's peers. More importantly (and redolent of the classical Confucian doctrine of correcting names or rectifying names - *zhengming*), in the appropriate social context and before sufficient numbers of one's community, a person's status can be changed, destroyed even, such that it becomes difficult to reclaim any meaningful social standing in the community.³¹⁷ Put crudely, people collectively stop taking a person seriously.

This leads directly to the second point: face-orientated subjects are particularly vulnerable to the skepticism and ridicule of their community. Hsien Chin Hu puts the point in explicitly psychological terms. She suggests that the recognition or esteem that others accord to a person plays a formative role in determining that person's view of themselves. Coordinated disapproval by peers can undermine a person's most basic sense of dignity or self-respect. Such dependency on the assessments of others thus influences what a person considers to be in his or her interest.

Some might suppose that the power of reason constitutes a form of autonomy that will put such heteronomy in its place. This might be so; but it is an open question whether reason can really sustain such psychological convictions and motivations; and the complex relations between face and shame, honour, social norms and social events, which are at the heart of sensibility *guanxi*, deserve more careful analysis. The appeal of an ethics of personal relationships in which face is prominent is that it avoids over confidence about what counts as the rational course of action; and given that it can be difficult from an external viewpoint to distinguish rational moral choice from moral egoism, there is reason to cultivate a sensibility that allows a greater role for a plurality of voices in one's deliberations. What mediates between an individual and the community is not just reason; it is also a sense of one's social standing in the eyes of others.

Face also challenges the importance of the idea of a private realm. A private space, free from public gaze, wherein actions remain unknown to external parties is a key liberal political value. But face appears to start from the assumption that actions will become

³¹⁷ This point is nicely brought out by Kipnis' alternative translation of the final sentence of Mao's memoir, '*...zuobuqi ren*'; translated in the passage above as 'never again hold up his head', it can more literally be translated as 'could never again be human'.

known (or even wants them to be known), presenting a psychology of action in which an agent conceives of situations as if they were already known to an imaginary audience. There is an apparent lack of interest in demarcating and protecting a private realm. This is not to deny the possible importance of a private realm – most obviously as a form of protection against encroaching powers of the state. But it does suggest that if sensibility *guanxi* is to offer resistance to the state it will not be through appeal to the private. But nor need this mean that some kind of blind conformism is the dominant feature of face, or that it always determines the outcome of events.³¹⁸ To better understand face, we might compare it with shame.

7.4 Shame, and its relation to face

It might be supposed that face is more or less equivalent to shame. Certainly, shame is an important part of *guanxi* and of Confucian ethics: the *Analects* places shame above laws and legal institutions in ensuring social harmony.³¹⁹ In so far as shame is understood as some kind of negative self-appraisal that results from imagining one's action from the perspective of others, then shame and face share common elements.³²⁰

However, the two concepts are not identical. Shame is often associated with feelings of embarrassment or fear of discovery, as when one mentally rehearses wrong doing and blushes, or passively but humiliatingly suffers a loss of control, as in the unwitting exposure of the naked body.³²¹ But, as Kipnis notes in his study of face in contemporary China, the reaction of those who lost face was not embarrassment but *anger* (1995, p.129). Face indicates not merely a fear of exposure or failure under the gaze of others; it also indicates agency, skill, and blame. One important aspect of face is the (expectation of the) provision of opportunity, a stage, for a person to demonstrate excellence. This often involves 'building up' a person in the presence of an audience, or

³¹⁸ Against the idea that face implies some form of mob rule or psychology, Mayfair Yang (1994) details how *guanxi* and personal regard built up before the cultural revolution often protected individuals during it. She describes a man who discovered that he knew his captors, and though nominally tortured and humiliated was in fact spared from significant harm by them despite the demand to publicly humiliate him.

³¹⁹ *Analects* 2.3. On the relationships between filial piety and shame, see below.

³²⁰ Shame appears to involve some failing or loss of power (such as falling over comically, failing to abide by expected conventions, or breaking a promise) that might, imaginatively if not literally, be seen or learnt of by others; and consciousness of possibly being found out leads to emotions such as fear or embarrassment, as well as to actions to avoid being found out or shamed. Here I draw on Bernard Williams discussion of shame (1993, pp. 75-103, 219-23).

³²¹ Williams does associate anger with guilt (though not shame), but this is not anger of one who feels guilt, but an anticipation of the reaction of the wronged party to oneself.

at least consciously (or from habitual social grace and skill) avoiding topics of conversation or actions that undermine the status of another. In this regard, face, like gift-giving, provides an opportunity to claim ‘social capital’.

This explains why face in the Chinese language takes an active verb: to give face (*geimianzi*); a person can be persuaded or induced to portray oneself in a good light. Such a process requires at least three parties: the person whose social standing is at issue, the person who elevates (or reduces) it, and those who observe such elevation or diminution. This performative aspect of face can also be understood in terms of the ideal of creating affecting events, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Face cannot be reduced to shame; but the function of *guanxi* does stand in a very important relation to shame: it helps to propagate it. As Bernard Williams notes (1993, p.82), a person does not feel shame in front of everyone. The opinions of those who are despised have little influence on a person’s conduct. But it is not only the despised who have a reduced power to evoke shame; there is another group - strangers. People such as those passed briefly on the street, unknown and unfamiliar, are less able to invoke feelings of shame than familiar others and thus influence conduct less. Part of the ethical significance of *guanxi* is thus that it is a mechanism that converts strangers into familiar others, and so expands the field of people who have sufficient standing in our eyes to evoke feelings of shame.

7.5 Other *guanxi* practices

There are many other practices or ‘forces’ operating within *guanxi* that influence people’s motivations and dispositions – i.e., their sense of their interests. In this final section I will sketch some of these to intimate the scope of *guanxi* practices that influence conduct.

A form of adaptive behaviour that might be associated with *guanxi*, and which has resonances with the Confucian tradition, is that of modelling oneself on those in one’s local social world.³²² Modelling is distinct from merely copying someone, since it involves a more imaginative, interpretive response to a role model. One does not seek to copy directly, since this might be of little use if the contexts of action differ, but creatively draw on others by analogy. As noted in the last chapter, the Confucian tradition

³²² The practice of modelling is implicit in the text’s references to emulation (*pi* 譬); see 6.30.

partly conceives of friendship (*you* 友) in this way. The character indicates friendship but its semantic range includes the meaning of peers training with a common master.³²³

Reverence or esteem for a particular person is another way in which personal relationships can influence conduct. Such esteem is usually predicated on a person undergoing a period of training or cultivation, as in the case of the teacher-student relationship. In Confucian thought, the family is the most obvious place in which such esteemed figures are encountered. Parents' opinions of their children's actions have a quite direct influence on the children's motivation (in so far as the parents are esteemed).

However, influence derived from esteem or reverence in the family is not one-way; it also runs in reverse. Regard (one might say reverence) for one's children influences and changes a parent's conduct.³²⁴ Precisely because children often revere their parents, copy them and grant the parent's opinions a privileged weight so, in response, the parent is more careful to set an example; what counts as their interests is a more open question because it is now grasped via some sense of the effect possible interests would have on their children.

Friendship is another way in which a person's motivations and interests can be directed or redirected. As Kennett and Cocking (1998) note, one of its distinguishing characteristics is susceptibility to the suggestions of friends. When a friend expresses an interest in going to the opera, this suggestion can have a direct effect on how one conceives of one's own interests – that is, one often develops an enthusiasm for the opera on account of the friend (and not because one decided, on reflection, that one would like to go to the opera).

Conversely, when an action is criticised by a friend, when a suggestion of a particular action or activity is met with a negative response by them, or when a suggestion meets with an indifferent response (even if not explicitly negative) then – in all these cases – the subject's motivation or enthusiasm for that action is diminished.

³²³ The classic *Analects* reference for this idea is 7.22: 'Wherever three people walk, surely one of them must be my teacher.'

³²⁴ Paul Woodruff, in his study of reverence, quotes Juvenal: 'The greatest reverence is due to your son; if you are fixing to do something disgraceful, even your baby boy should block you from sin. Don't think he's too young... (Juvenal Satire 14.47-49, quoted in Woodruff, 2001, p. 232). Woodruff understands reverence as an understanding of human limitations, the capacity to be in awe of what lies outside human control and, as a result of awe towards what is higher than ourselves, being able to feel respect for beings lower or less able than ourselves – including children (2001, pp.3-4).

Friends' responses often affect motivation directly, and are not merely treated as a consideration to be incorporated into one's on-going deliberations (although it certainly can be).³²⁵

Whether or not such motivational susceptibility is the defining feature of friendship is debatable. A friend might be immune to such mutual influencing and susceptibility and yet still be valued (as when two people are brought together because of a pre-existing shared love of a certain activity and also come to know and love each other's characters). But what is valuable about this insight, and most relevant to *guanxi* practice, is that when such motivational susceptibility and openness to redirection by a familiar other (friends, but also family relationships and even acquaintances) occurs mutually, then it is an important ethical practice. Why this is so brings us to the next step of the argument: what are the practical and ethical implications of these multiple *guanxi* practices and what influence do they exert on people's interests?

8. The practices of sensibility *guanxi*: coordinating conduct, lessening conflict

I have described the many practices of *guanxi* and how these form a sensibility. The practices make a subject's interests malleable - they are formed and reformed through personal interaction and commitments. Such influence can be reflective, as when people worry about what others will think of them; or it arises through salient but inarticulate emotions such as shame; or through changes in motivation or disposition that are not marked by any significant psychological experience, as when a person adopts a friend's practical suggestion without reflective awareness of this.

A useful metaphor for describing such mutual directing and redirecting is *conversation*, contrasted with rational argument. Conversation includes such logical and structured exchanges, but is more complex. Conversations start, proceed for a while, then die away; conversations are interrupted and redirected suddenly, often without participants being unduly bothered. Conversations lead unexpectedly to new topics; they

³²⁵ The classic account of how love for another can transform motivation is provided in Phaedrus' speech in Plato's Symposium. As Phaedrus puts it, 'Possession by love would infuse even utter cowards with courage and make them indistinguishable from those to whom bravery comes most easily' (trans. Robin Waterfield, 1994, p. 11). Love can motivate a person to perform beyond conventional expectations, possibly exceeding what others thought that person capable of, and surprising the actor.

are given energy when someone is interested in the same topic, and dry up when no one is. Sometimes interlocutors can express a thought better than oneself and lead one to realise what one really wanted to say. Suffice to say, topics are to conversations as personal interests are to relationships.

The issue now is: how do such practices and the redirection of interests relate to the public realm of the state? The first part of this answer is that *guanxi* practices generate a form of stable social order. How is this characterised?

8.1 *Guanxi* producing a stable local social order

Guanxi practices contribute to a local social order because, over time, they function to co-ordinate the interests of those who share in a network of personal and social ties. Coordination might take several forms. Under the influence of *guanxi* practices, some of a subject's interests diminish in importance; it also involves the creation or discovery of shared interests. But *guanxi* practices do not necessitate the convergence of interests such that those connected in a network of particularistic ties have the same interests. Rather, over time and in a piecemeal way, they bring about a compatibility of interests – the reduction or avoidance of practical conflict. This form of social order is not the result of a theoretical model which has been implemented; rather, it is defined negatively, or by absence. A stable order emerges when these coordinating practices have sufficiently reduced practical conflict and direct, abrasive confrontation. It consists in stable patterns of interaction in which people have *confidence* – I return to the latter idea below. Such a social order, arising from the gradual making and remaking of personal interests, provides a second way to understand the Confucian ideal of harmony (*he* 和).³²⁶

Consider an example of a shared house as a very small *guanxi* network. Suppose the housemates are adults, not a family, and neither strangers nor particularly close to each other. Initially, there is practical conflict. A housemate leaves unwashed dishes in the sink, while another prizes cleaning utensils promptly; two people seek to shower at the same time, competing for the one bathroom. Gradually, they adjust their ways of doing things and reduce practical conflict. Sometimes this involves rational, discursive debate, often something like *guanxi* practices are responsible: developing affection for

³²⁶ In addition to the idea of a joyful shared experience discussed in the previous chapter.

housemates, regard for particular others, a sense of reciprocal obligation and indebtedness for favours, sensitivity to one's standing in the eyes of other housemates, susceptibility to practical suggestions, and so on. Such malleability contrasts with the possible intransigence of someone who remains largely insensitive to the forces constituting a *guanxi* sensibility. The example is artificial because networks of personal connections are typically diffuse and hard to clearly define;³²⁷ and the extension and scope of such networks is exactly what enables them to generate a local and not just domestic order.

An image helpful for capturing this potentially pervasive reach is a rhizome: myriad connecting strands connecting multiple levels and points, with no clear order or centre.³²⁸ It is also helpful to contrast this local social order, the emerging compatibility of interests sustained by myriad *guanxi* practices, with other accounts of social order and of how one person relates to others in their social world.

It is not a social order that simply reinforces traditional precedents, and timeless obligations fixed by a social hierarchy. *Guanxi* subjects make use of accepted and conventional ways of doing things but, as Kipnis notes (1997, p.7) they skilfully use tradition and adopt strategies to develop their own projects. The concept of face, for example, involves appeal to social status but this is not its only use: it also promotes generosity and serves to restrain the kind of material accumulation associated with instrumental *guanxi*. Further, this conception of social order is not communitarian. It does not rely directly on the politics of group identity or of a shared narrative or history. As Otis and Lo note (2003, p.143), contemporary *guanxi* practices transcend old barriers of class and kinship.

This is not an account of human connections based on market relations: economic actors regarding themselves and those they interact with as separate, and who perceive social interaction in terms of exchange value. We noted above that *guanxi* involves the fusion of affective attachment and instrumental use of others; too explicit a sense of use undermines the relationship. Face also prevents relationships from being rent-seeking and

³²⁷ A further difficulty is that sharing a house can be understood as paradigmatic example of a kind of contractual, self-interested model of social association, where people might live together for economic reasons and have limited expectations of the shared living experience.

³²⁸ Deleuze and Gattari explain a rhizomatic network as 'General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of [flows]' (1987, p. 21).

disposable. Finally, this social order is not legalistic. *Guanxi* subjects do not see their relationships in terms of rights, contracts and appeals to the law to defend their interests.

One way to think of this social order is as an alternative approach to civil society. It is one where the basic social fabric is composed of the multiple *guanxi* practices. As these are propagated or neglected so the fabric strengthens or ruptures. Civil society is understood as a site of resistance to the state, so such an association would support the claim that this social order can resist the state. Just as an individual can appeal to (inalienable) rights in defence against the state, so too might these practices constitute a defence.³²⁹ This analogy can only be taken so far, however, for two reasons.

First, the *guanxi* social order can only be a local order, since there is a limit to how far such networks of personal connections can extend and still have practical effect. These practices will be stronger where relationships are closer and interactions more frequent, but taper off into negligible effects at the edges of such networks.³³⁰ But civil society is typically understood to apply to a wider range of people, potentially uniting a nation's citizens. Second, civil society is founded on institutions and organised groups defined by missions and charters, not merely personal connections, which represent groups sharing common aims or goals.³³¹ Further, civil society involves distinct groups that are mutually antagonistic as well as in opposition to the state; but *guanxi* orders are characterised by a lack of conflict. *Guanxi* relationships are thus best thought of as an important form of civility, comprising one element of a civil society.³³²

9. *Guanxi*-derived social order resisting the state

The social order generated by *guanxi* can conflict with the order promulgated by the state, understood as its laws and regulations. Consider the following example, adopted from a study of migrant workers in contemporary Beijing (Li Zhang, 2001).

³²⁹ Christopher Bryant (1995, p. 148), for example, describes civil society in terms of 'social self-organisation', and *guanxi* practices fit this description in so far as they have the power to independently generate a social order.

³³⁰ This might be understood in terms of the concentric circle model of influence depicted in the Confucian classic *The Great Learning*.

³³¹ For a discussion of the features of civil society, see Bryant (1995) and Salvador Giner (1995).

³³² The order generated by *guanxi* practices might also be compared to the common law tradition, where de facto social norms are recognised as formal legal precedents, in contrast to the creation of new laws by a legislative body.

Rural workers from near Shanghai were able to find jobs in the capital Beijing through ‘native place ties’ – *guanxi* networks connecting people through their place of origin. Personal ties enabled new arrivals to gain a foothold in the city, and as more workers arrived they collectively established a home, a shared social space, in one particular area of the city. Networks for the exchange of information developed, as well as the provision of mutual help. *Guanxi* practices thus created economic opportunities for the otherwise deprived, and led to the emergence of a self-regulating social order.

A change in city government housing laws led to a campaign to evict these workers. In general, workers have few rights, and can obtain only temporary residence permits. At this point, when the social order created through *guanxi* practices was threatened by the state, *guanxi* practices became a site of resistance. As Zhang’s study makes clear, such resistance can take at least two forms. The first is enlisting support of managers or people of influence within the Beijing bureaucracies responsible for the relevant laws. Such contact was not for individual gain, but for collective interest. Personal connections were also cultivated with political leaders from the workers’ native place.

Second, the social group reinvented itself as a quasi-political group, forming an association representing all migrant workers in the area. It then contacted national political bodies who might take up its case with the Beijing city government. At the same time, utilising the motivating power of native place ties, this semi-formal group made contact with local government officials in their home city and persuaded them to make petitions to the Beijing government on their behalf. Two provincial officials visited Beijing to deliver an appeal to stop the campaign of eviction (Zhang, 2001, p.193).

The workers eventually lost their struggle against the city government. But the example makes clear how *guanxi* relations can resist the state, and in a way that is prima facie ethical. However, it might be objected that this example relies for its effect on an undemocratic or illiberal state and thus cannot be generalised. But similar cases of reasonable resistance building from local social order created by *guanxi* might be described, and which feature a liberal democratic state.

One example is conflict between two approaches to punishment, one drawing on local networks or familiar relationships and one administered by the state. *Guanxi*

practices suggest a form of punishment that seeks to reintegrate a person into the local community where the offence occurred. Such punishment takes the form of shaming. The community gathers, the perpetrator of the crime is brought before them and must face his or her victim. He must apologise to the victim in the presence of the community. The loss of face on the part of the perpetrator, the locating of the crime within a community constituted by particularistic ties, and the possibility of forgiveness all serve to reform the offender's conduct and restore local order and confidence. However, in such cases and depending on the offence, the state might demand that the offence be dealt with by impersonal legal institutions and the application of criminal law. It becomes a case of 'so-and-so versus the people', with the people now understood as the state. In so far as there is confidence in the order generated by *guanxi* ties, and in shaming as a means to reintegrate an individual into a local social order, then a conflict emerges between the local social order and the laws of the state. Resistance to turning an offender over to the state might result, in the form of bypassing or circumventing state imposed legal requirements, thereby rendering them difficult to enforce.

Other examples of such resistance could be explored; here are two in outline. The first concerns the sale and consumption of alcohol. The state imposes a legal minimum age for purchasing and consuming alcohol. But at the level of personal and particularistic ties, such one-size-fits-all can easily be at odds with how alcohol consumption is viewed within particular networks of personal connections. A simple example would be a store clerk who sold alcohol to a minor he knows well and trusts, and who (genuinely) intended to take the alcohol home to his father.

The second example concerns physical contact between teachers and pupils at school. This is increasingly subject to legislation that imposes uniform standards across schools. Such new legislation is not without reason, of course. It can, however, be insensitive to the local conditions and the actual relationships that exist between particular teachers and particular students. Some teachers can no doubt skilfully and tenderly use physical contact as a means of nurturing students, and there are some students who benefit from such practices. As a result, one can easily imagine teachers, possibly collectively within a school, defying such regulations and in circumstances that appear reasonable. In both cases, if similar acts of resistance based on local personal

affinities are repeated in sufficient numbers, they can put pressure on the law and bring about change, perhaps improving the law or leading to its being rescinded.

10. Why *guanxi* practices constitute an ethical form of resistance

The question arises whether such resistance is really ethically justified, or whether the grounds of ethical conduct reside in the laws and regulations issued by the state.

There are two ways in which such resistance can be defended as ethical: by highlighting the ethical weaknesses of the state, and by underlining the ethical features of *guanxi* practice. I will briefly comment on the former and then discuss the latter.

10.1 Problems with the state

We noted that a characteristic of an ethical state is its commitment to impartiality and the creation of laws that reflect this ideal. Such impartiality constitutes a justification of the laws generated by a centralised political authority. Impartiality means the state's laws embody the interests of all and give no undue weight to particular interest.

But there are various problems in claiming such ethical justification for actual laws.

Perhaps the more pressing problem, even in liberal democratic states, is that of representation. Law-makers struggle to represent the interests of those they represent and to whom the laws that they make apply. In making policy law makers inevitably have to rely on information which, while as complete as is possible, nevertheless provides only a partial representation of those they officially represent. This problem is compounded because impartiality requires that persons and situations be conceptualised in terms of generalisable categories, so that different considerations and situations can be made commensurable and amenable to unified policy decisions. But working with such general representations obscures the rich contextual details of particular situations.³³³ This problem is amplified because working with such generic representations not only leads to insufficient sensitivity to local conditions – the conditions among stable local social groups; it also introduces the danger that the general categories and representations appealed to will hide covert biases, since images appealed to are often culturally

³³³ See Flanagan and Adler (1983) for such an argument.

transmitted and reflect entrenched power relations. This has particularly been a concern for feminist political theorists.³³⁴

Such a representative gap between central political authority and local social conditions might be inevitable. Further, it will be amplified in so far as the local social order I have described emerges without any formal attempt to represent it. But other doubts remain about justifying state laws through the ideal of impartiality.³³⁵

Furthermore, this criticism has assumed an idealised conception of a liberal state. But others have viewed the state's relation with its subjects, including the supposedly liberal state, in more sceptical terms, through an analysis of power (Foucault, 1980). If we start from these critiques of the state, and the inevitable tendency of state organs and bureaucracies to discipline and control the lives of their subjects, then the normative force attached to *guanxi* practices is further strengthened.³³⁶ Given such regimes of power, *guanxi* practices appear as an important means of resisting, and even securing a form of freedom.³³⁷ We thus have reason to consider whether the local social order created by *guanxi* might itself be an ethical order, at least sometimes justified in resisting the state.

10.2 Why is sensibility *guanxi* ethical?

Some reasons for defending *guanxi* should be clear from earlier arguments about how to conceive of the 'ethical' (chapter III). If ethical conduct means being guided by conceptions of justification, obligation, practical norms and so on, and if personal relationships can provide substantive and coherent accounts of these, then personal relationships provide a conception of ethical conduct. For example, at least one conception of obligation characteristic of sensibility *guanxi* is the same as the conception of ethical obligation discussed in chapter III: serial personal obligation, i.e., to develop a basis of familiarity with those one encounters. Similarly, *guanxi* is also implicated in the

³³⁴ See Iris Young (1990, especially pp. 97-9).

³³⁵ As we noted in chapter I for example, impartiality is not the only possible form of ethical justification. Empathy, concerned attentiveness, dialogue and a non-instrumental concern for the good of another are also arguably species of justification (Margaret Urban Walker, 1989); and these do not necessarily require recourse to a centralised process of law-making. Relatedly, impartiality might also be an impractical ideal for public policy, since it is not clear when the ideal has been achieved (Friedman, 1993).

³³⁶ Mayfair Yang explains *guanxi* practice as a response to a state's attempt to discipline its subjects (1994, pp. 177-9). On this view, the purpose of a state is 'increasing organisation of population and welfare for the sake of increased force and productivity'. This requires the state to discipline the movements and activities of subjects, as well as introducing and regulating discourse to fix and manipulate individual's identities.

³³⁷ For an account of how *guanxi* practices might function in such a state, see Yang, 1994 (pp. 247-286, especially pp. 276-86).

ethical ideal of creating affective interpersonal events, discussed in chapter IV. Giving gifts and presenting others with opportunities to gain prestige in social contexts are examples of this. But there are two other ways in which the coordination of interests and social order that *guanxi* brings can be considered ethical.

The first can be seen by contrasting two approaches to dealing with diversity in personal interests and the potential for conflict among these. On one approach, people express their various and distinct interests, and then seek adjudication between them in the public realm – typically, some fair arrangement or balancing of interests. In this model, judgement and a concern with justification are primary. In the alternative model, represented by sensibility *guanxi*, becoming enmeshed in extended networks of particularistic ties renders a person less inclined and perhaps less capable of identifying with a fixed set of interests (without denying that there are some interests that a person identifies with). This reduced self-awareness of a defined and articulate set of interests allows a person's interests to be more easily redirected.³³⁸ Nor are interests submitted to a public realm for adjudication (though they might be subject to arbitration or mediation with the help of familiar others). In this model, certain motivational dispositions and sensitivity to *guanxi* practices are primary.

Three considerations suggest that the second route to stable social order is an ethical 'method'. First, it avoids the problem facing the first approach, discussed above, of deciding who will be the judge or adjudicator, and what standards will be applied. Second, and following Iris Murdoch, it fits with an important claim about the nature of the ethical. Namely, the unexamined life can be virtuous (1970, p.1); those who are considered morally good can have little conception of *their* interests.³³⁹ Their unselfconscious approach to practical situations, and their subsequent ethical reactions such as pity, indignation, shame and so forth, give their normative judgments credibility.

³³⁸ The practices of *guanxi* can also generate a salient conception of interest, as with the desire for face or social recognition. This interest, however, is not fixed but can often be satisfied in multiple ways. There are many ways in which one can make another look good, or refraining from casting him or her in a poor light. It is only when recognition of a defined social position is demanded that an interest in face becomes rigid and less easily reconciled with the interests of others.

³³⁹ This echoes the view found in the *Daodejing*, that when the matter of principles and justice are introduced to determine what the right action consists in then a problem has already occurred; social life has broken down in some way. See chapter 38 for an explicit articulation of this view.

This suggests that the kind of ethical subject we can have most confidence in is one for whom the issue of its own interests do not arise.

Third, the second position fits with a conception of ethics that stretches back to Plato. Ethics involves the restriction of the desires and impulses of the self, so as to make a person more sensitive to the needs and interests of others.³⁴⁰ In so far as the first method allows for relatively unfettered expression of interests – personal desires and preferences – and hopes that adjudication between these is possible, then it neglects a key concern of ethics. In contrast, the second model redirects desires and interests and so accords with this concern to rein in the ego.

A second reason for recognising *guanxi*-derived social order as ethical derives from the issue of confidence. Ethical conduct – the question of what features of practical life are to be prioritised when we ask what we ought to do – has to begin from something we have confidence in. Normative judgments are partially distinguished by their sense of conviction. To lose confidence in normative judgments, as when someone lapses into uncertainty and indecision with regard to value questions, is to undermine ethical conduct. While over-confidence in judgment is equally to be avoided, since this implies arrogance, insensitivity and judgment, confidence in the appropriate measure is important. The *guanxi* practices described generate and sustain just such confidence. They constitute the basic fabric of people's social lives, and give conviction to many of their everyday practical and normative decisions. In contrast, laws imposed by a centralised legislative body cannot claim to be a comparable source of confidence. There are several reasons why *guanxi* practices cultivate confidence in our normative responses.

First, *guanxi* practices contrast with two approaches to ethical conduct that do not instil confidence in normative judgments. The first approach is the moral realist view that ethical judgments are matters of ethical knowledge: they are propositions that can be correctly or incorrectly judged to apply to an objective state of affairs. Problems with this view arise when we try to determine which claims are true. There is little confidence and

³⁴⁰ Iris Murdoch writes, 'The problem is to accommodate within moral philosophy, and suggest methods for dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind' (1970, p. 52). Murdoch offers an apt modification of Plato's analogy of the cave to illustrate this idea (p.70). If the cave is understood as the primitive self, then better perception of moral reality arises not only from exiting the cave, but from quelling the fire in the cave, in order to perceive more clearly what is outside – in this case, other people and their concerns. This is what *guanxi* practices achieve.

much disagreement on whether claims like ‘capital punishment is wrong’ are true or false. This is no to deny that there can be a zealous fervour on the part of some in such matters. But when ethical judgments are taken to be literally true like factual descriptions - ‘abortion is wrong’ - then they move towards dogmatic assertion and the wrong type of confidence. At the same time, inquiries aiming to specify their truth conditions prove inconclusive.

The practices of *guanxi* are not concerned with propositional knowledge; they are about sensibility and dispositions. They do not require subjects to learn which declarations are right and which wrong, thereby learning a social code that belongs to some particular culture or community – as conservative or traditional moralists demand.

There is also a problem of confidence with a second approach, a rationalist view that ethical judgments are intellectual judgements, the outcome of deliberative reflection. Here, the agent temporarily steps back from his dispositions to act or feel, to arrive at a final conclusive decision – an intellectual certainty – about how to act. But, as Bernard Williams observes, this picture of an agent responding to a self-conscious impasse by wilfully arriving at a decision to determine his will often fails to deliver conviction about what to do.³⁴¹ Faced with a difficult choice about what to do, decisions about how to respond often leave the deliberator with doubts and without the motivation to enact the decision – and not simply from weakness of the will.

But conduct directed by *guanxi* practices does not primarily rely on decisions deriving from potentially complex reflective judgements, and so is not subject to such a failure of conviction. *Guanxi* are a myriad of practices, each capable of dynamically directing and redirecting a person’s interests and dispositions. That said, *guanxi* practices do not exclude reflection and rational debate. Admittedly, a *guanxi* subject’s reflection might be more inclined to begin from a certain place, such as how to treat certain people or whether to maintain certain relationships. That said, *guanxi* practices, understood as a bedrock of practical life that often direct and redirect interests below the ‘radar’ of self-conscious reflection, in no way exclude critical reflection.

³⁴¹ This is not to claim that reflection on how to act is not crucial to ethical conduct, only that its significance for ethical conduct does not reside in a wilful deliberative conclusion or decision. Reflection can, for example, lead a person to see things differently and so act differently, without any judgment being made.

Furthermore, such critical reflection has its own costs. As Bernard Williams notes (1985), critical reflection is itself a practice, which takes up time and resources. As noted in chapter II, in extremis, it can undermine confidence in personal relationships. Therefore, while it might be an ideal that rational reflection can be applied in theory to anything, and thus enable people to give or withhold their consent to conduct and issues, in practice it cannot. In so far as this is a practical limitation and ethics is about practical activity then it is also an ethical issue. It counts against the thought that reflection is a particularly privileged form of ethical activity. Without denying the obvious importance of reflection, this at least raises the prospect that there is a need for an even more fundamental level at which conduct can be guided and coordinated with confidence. This is the level at which *guanxi* practices can operate, orientating a person towards, and coordinating action with, others in the local social world.

There are other reasons for having the confidence and conviction that *guanxi* practices generate. Perhaps the simplest of these is that doubt, the opposite of confidence, is often a function of reflection and in so far as *guanxi* practices have a direct effect on disposition or motivations (as when giving a gift generates an affective response) then they are not subject to doubt (though, again, they can be made the object of reflection and of doubt).

Guanxi practices also generate what might be called social confidence or trust. One such source mentioned earlier is their capacity to reduce practical conflict among those who share in a social network. Also, the sheer diversity and multiplicity of practices create confidence that a person's interests are likely to find some degree of expression in the social order. For example, they generate a confidence that the demands made are reasonable (arising in a context of reciprocity or from a background of prior acts of one's own generosity that one can now draw on with a request), and that they will be satisfied (the sense of indebtedness that prompts action, and threat of a loss of face in not helping, etc).

A concrete example of such social confidence might be a local food merchant and confidence that his foodstuffs are safe (at least as far as he is able to confirm this and assuming that he is not deceived). This is because *guanxi* practices keep him tied to his community. There is a desire for good standing and a sense of shame that would

accompany adulteration or carelessness in preparation, his attachment or susceptibility to those whom he regards as model food merchants and teachers, and his gratitude or sense of obligation to familiar customers. This plethora of ties underpins this confidence in the local social order and its implicit normative judgments.

11. Summarising the argument and the limitations of *guanxi*

I have argued that an ethics of personal relationships can exert influence in the public realm of state policy, and is therefore not an ethics suited only to the domestic or private realms. To show this, I described some of the many constitutive practices of *guanxi* (networks of personal connections), and how these direct and coordinate conduct. I outlined conflicts between the social order that *guanxi* practices generate and regulations and laws issued by the state. Finally, I argued that from an ethical standpoint *guanxi*-directed resistance is not always in the wrong.

We should also note, however, the limitations of the conception of ethical conduct depicted by *guanxi* practices. We noted above that while *guanxi* networks perform a function analogous to civil society, they are only one small part of a mature account of civil society. For example, the need for inclusive public discourse is another pillar of civil society's resistance to the state that is beyond the operations of *guanxi*. Similarly, the ideal of impartiality in public policy, although problematic, is inclusive in a way that *guanxi* practices are not.

I have not claimed, however, that *guanxi* practices provide a complete account of the ethical life. Rather, studying these makes us think more carefully about one particular conception of ethical conduct, and its distinctive features.

Perhaps the correct understanding of the relation of *guanxi* practices to state policy is a dialectical or symbiotic one. *Guanxi* practices can oppose and sometimes bring about worthwhile changes in state policy; but sometimes the confidence and social order that arise through *guanxi* practices will be slowly reshaped, and rightly so, by new public policies. This symbiotic relationship is sufficient to retain for *guanxi* a meaningful role in the public realm, without exaggerating its importance.

12. Conclusion: what does *guanxi* tell us about ethics?

What do the *guanxi* practices described, and which constitute an actual ‘form of life’ in some places, tell us about how to think about the most basic way to act ethically? The answer offered by sensibility *guanxi* is: structure people’s strongest dispositions and motivations around a salient and ubiquitous feature of any person’s practical world: other particular people. Taken as an ideal, it proposes that each person’s dispositions and motivations can avoid conflict with those of others and achieve social accord. To speak of the strongest or most influential dispositions and motivations is not to make a naturalistic claim about what humans are like; it is a normative project: dispositions that focus on particular people should be the most powerful forces in determining action, and that a person should have such dispositions towards as wide a set of people as possible. Habituation or cultivation of the appropriate dispositions are thus necessary, and immersion in the practices of *guanxi* in daily life achieves this. To take people as the most salient and ubiquitous objects in the world of action is to establish a direct link between particular people and dispositions to act or feel, something even more basic than the reflective act of stepping back and fixing on an action. The two are not incompatible; it is merely a question of lexical priority. Shame, for example, is a *guanxi* practice that often uses reflection (as when a person considers what her family would think of her if she did X). Creating a decisive set of motivations and dispositions that congeal around particular people encountered in the social world also contrasts with motivations focusing on more abstract goals or personal projects (hence its illiberal undertone), as well as on an emphasis on intellectual deliberative judgments to determine action.

Various conceptions of ethical conduct are needed. But at least the ethical conception drawn from the personal need not be seen as subservient to and merely derived from a dominant concern with how to order an ethical public realm. An ethics of *guanxi* can be seen as a critique of social institutions and policies, generating confidence in a local perception of what is appropriate, and indicating when a putatively ethical policy gives rise to an ethically objectionable state of affairs.

Conclusion: final thoughts

In this work, I explored the idea of a conception of ethical life based on how personal relationships of various kinds influence and direct conduct. I suggested that such a conception is constituted by generic ethical categories or features, such as the justification of action, obligation, practical reason, and a set of norms or standards that distinguish right and wrong. In short, a conception of ethical conduct gives more determinate content to each of these basic features of human practical activity. I drew on classical Confucian texts to show how the features of personal relationships constitute one, but only one, possible conception of ethical conduct. This involved investigating the accounts of obligation, practical reasoning and so forth implicit in Confucian texts such as the *Analects*.

At the same time, I also offered an argument about why shaping these basic building blocks of ethical life in this way, around the features and practices of personal relationships, makes sense. That is, I located the project of rethinking basic ethical categories within a larger picture of human activity that seemed to call for it. This was a picture of worthwhile human practical life as a series of episodic personal interactions with people to whom we are or can become familiar. On this view, a social interaction that is also personal and gives rise to affective experiences such as delight, reverence or humour is the most important unit of ethical analysis and argument.

In the final chapter, I tried to deflect the charge that this picture of an ethical life is trivial, offering only a hedonistic attitude, an ethics of dinner parties that is socially-irrelevant or, worse, wilfully naïve. I suggested that the same practices and features of personal relationships that make possible such affective and aesthetic experiences are also those that coordinate and redirect action on a larger scale. A sense of shame, a concern about one's social standing, a susceptibility to the suggestions of others, and motivational dispositions sensitive to the reactions of others can create a stable social order and minimise practical conflict (important goals of any ethical theory); this is so even if their effects are sometimes implicit and unacknowledged, failing to feature in explicitly deliberation about the moral thing to do.

This approach to ethics raises several issues requiring further investigation, and objections will no doubt be raised against some of the claims made. One particular objection is worth rehearsing. This has been raised in discussions of care ethics which, as noted, shares some ideas and sensibilities with the present project. This dissenting view holds that ethical conduct necessarily provides some account of how to treat distant others. Such people (to say nothing of animals and non-sentient life forms) lie beyond the realm of our social interactions but their interests still deserve consideration. Equating ethical conduct narrowly, as attention to personal relationships, and neglecting this wider context leaves open the possibility that loving, friendly and caring conduct violate this requirement.

The conception of ethical conduct that I presented accommodated this requirement by de-emphasising close and intimate personal relationships, characterised by preference for an exclusive and small set of people. Instead, it granted practical priority or ethical standing to a less intimate personal relationship experienced towards a wider circle of people, including those who are initially strangers. This undermines the distinction between a laudable impartiality and a troubling impartiality, on which the objection partly depends. However, despite this, it might still be objected that the account does not satisfy the requirement to consider the interests of distant others. Even with the elevation of a less intimate and more widely-experienced form of personal relationship, the circle of people whose interests become practically significant for the philial subject is, arguably, still more limited than this ethical demand permits.

In response, two lines of argument might be developed in further work. The first questions the importance of the requirement to consider the interests of distant others. I do not mean that distant others do not matter. Breadth of consideration is one salient feature of ethical conduct; but it is only one important consideration. It is debatable whether it has greater authority than other modes of ethical thought and action, such as careful attentiveness to the particularity of each person encountered. At several points, I argued that it does not. This demand to consider distant others may simply be one ethical consideration which, rather than functioning as a necessary feature of an ethical outlook, must jostle for position alongside other foundational beliefs and insights without being assured of a definitive role in shaping reasonable and responsible behaviour.

This leads directly to the second response. The conception of ethical conduct presented, which maps how personal relationships can influence and direct conduct, is merely one of many conceptions of an ethical life. A filial subject is not the only kind of ethical subject. A complete ethical life might be a life that requires moving between different understandings or conceptions of worthwhile or good action. Further, there might be tension between different conceptions, as various viewpoints exert influence on conduct. This might seem undesirable, if one conceives of ethics as a single unified theory of acting well or rightly. But such tension might be an ineliminable part of ethical life. As noted earlier, perhaps one of the most basic requirements of ethical conduct is a form of practical wisdom that entails appreciation of which conception or perspective to adopt in a particular situation.

Furthermore, it might be important that issues are contested from different ethical standpoints, each making some reasonable or plausible practical suggestion about how to act. Here the ethical echoes the political, prizing values such as participation and representation. All this might leave the final outcome, what counts as truly or ultimately ethical conduct, up in the air. However, the lack of a foundational intellectual certainty about what is ethical might not matter too much as long as practical conflicts are resolved in ways that cohere, within reasonable limits, with people's understanding of what is reasonable, admirable, caring and so on. As Aristotle noted, perhaps the 'ethical' only permits of so much precision.

Although the most fundamental level of ethical discourse might be irreducibly pluralistic, the idea that conflict and contestation are themselves part of ethical life does have one substantive negative implication for the Confucian ideas considered. In so far as Confucian thought takes harmony – as the absence of conflict - to be a very important value, then it is revealed as an incomplete picture of an ethical life. It is, one might say, too keen to resolve conflict and restore a social harmony, rather than letting proponents of different ethical viewpoints work through their differences. Disagreement and representation are neglected values in Confucian social ethics.

Confucian social ethics appears in need of supplementing by sophisticated theories of the state – explaining, for example, the effects of modern state bureaucracy on social life – as well as accounts of individual rights that might alert and protect people

from state power. In this respect, Confucian ethics is incomplete, and constitutes just one of the critical viewpoints available for determining action.

Despite this, the approach of Confucian ethics still has much to offer. This will be best realised through research that focuses on the values and concepts that are key to the ethical vision of classical Confucianism, but which could not be analysed in detail in the present work. Further research ought to focus in detail on these concepts.

Two most in need of analysis are deference (*gong* 恭) and yielding (*rang* 讓). These are often regarded as a weakness or vice, a view partly sustained by ethical theories that prioritise autonomy and individual deliberative judgment. Certainly, a person might yield to another merely because of their social status or power, without any more compelling reason. Similarly, deference to the interests of another sometimes arises simply because that person presents a demand or expresses a preference. Rather than consider the merits of the demand, one acquiesces to it. Viewed in these ways, yielding or deference can seem weak or even cowardly – a character failing to be contrasted with virtues such integrity or plain and forthright speech.

Deference and yielding could be viewed more sympathetically, however. Most obviously, they are associated with the virtue of selflessness. Someone who defers to the judgement and stated (or even expected) interests and needs of others resembles someone who sacrifices their own interest for the sake of others. But deference is not simply submission or self-neglect. It also elicits a response in its recipients. It invites another into a particular kind of a relationship – one attentive to the other. That deference is an invitation becomes clear when we recognise that deference is a conscious act that can easily be withheld; instead of deference there could have been contention. Deference is important because it's a suspending of self-interest, but in a way that, ideally, limits or affects the interests and attitudes of the other. At the very least, it introduces a second-order awareness of self-interest, in that one party has refrained from acting on what appears to be their own interests; this in turn 'inspires' the other to hesitate in treating their present interests as something to be simply pursued. The Confucian faith that deference and yielding are crucial to good moral character and a stable social life is a topic that further work must consider.

Another future research topic that will extend and strength positions only sketched or intimated in this work is the nature of personal or moral responsibility. Under the influence of the rationalist ethics developed during the European Enlightenment, it has become common to ascribe to people a certain kind of personal and moral responsibility. This is the responsibility to make deliberative moral judgements that are structured by certain kinds of normative moral principles. Such responsibility presupposes acceptance of a certain form of freedom and the rejection of fatalism or determinism. People are free to, and morally ought to, structure their action according to such deliberative judgments, and they are to be praised for doing so and blamed for failing to do so. Something like this conception of responsibility and freedom is central to the general picture of ethical conduct generated by a preoccupation with narrow moral theory.

But this notion of moral responsibility and its implicit account of freedom are less clear than is sometimes assumed. In many aspects of social life, individual deliberative judgments are less important to outcomes than this picture presupposes. How an action or course of events turns out is often due to moral luck or ‘fate’ as much as how an individual deliberates.

An examination of how the Confucian ethical tradition has approached such questions is needed. We have seen how individual deliberative judgments are less important to the moral life in the Confucian vision. Accordingly, we must ask whether Confucian thinkers had a less precise and ambitious conception of moral responsibility and culpability, and whether they have any analogue to the concept of freedom that is integral to such a pronounced sense of individual accountability. The Confucian emphasis on the gradual development of dispositions of character and the creation of social harmony can tell us much about the contemporary liberal concern with moral and personal responsibility.

Such investigations are for the future. For now, I finish with a comment on the significance of what has been attempted. I have offered a novel approach to Confucian thought that draws together some of its own key concepts in a syncretic fashion (filial piety, delight, shame, modelling oneself on other people, etc). To argue that the early Confucian texts yield a novel conception of ethical life, I drew on Western ethical

theorists such as Bernard Williams, Carol Gilligan and Marilyn Friedman. This allows for a novel and subtle understanding of key Confucian ideas, such as the relation of personal relationships to the ethical, and the nature of filial piety and ethical obligation. At the same time, taking Confucian ethics seriously allows for the introduction of new material to existing debates within contemporary Anglo-American ethical theory. As more Chinese language material is made available to English-language audiences, the prospects for such comparative work improve, and a more nuanced reading of our own ethical traditions can result. The present work can be considered as a small contribution to this worthy end.

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