

Virtue in human practice: a comparative perspective

Yang Guorong

I

Similar to *arete* in Aristotle, *de* (德), the Chinese term for virtue, has such a semantic association with “*de*” (得), which means “to obtain” or “to acquire,” that *Guanzi* 管子 even directly claims: “*de* (德) implies ‘*de*’ (得).” In Daoism, virtue is the special feature obtained from Dao and consequently provide real foundation for the development of things: “Something that causes things to grow is called virtue” (Chapter 12, *Zhuangzi*). As far as Confucianism is concerned, Zhang Zai claims, *de* (德) implies “*de*” (得) and virtue is a quality that could be possessed”; “Virtue means to obtain principles under Heaven.”¹ Similarly says Wang Fuzhi 王夫之,

1 Zhang Zai, *Collected works of Zhang Zai* 《张载集》, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局, 1978, p. 32-3.

“Everything obtained in activity can be called as 德 (*de*), virtue.”² Virtue discussed here is not limited to ethics although it is related to human being. However, virtue does mainly mean moral virtue in many cases: the idea of “the respect for virtue” in the *Book of history* 《尚书》, the doctrine that “faithfulness is a justified virtue” in *Zuo’s commentary on records of spring and autumn* 《左传》, Confucius’ appeal to “political performance based on virtue” in *Analects* 《论语》, to name a few.

508

In Ancient Greece or in the Pre-Qin period in China, virtue, that is, *arete* or *de* (德), originally has both ontological and ethical significance, which reflects the relevance of virtue to existence of human beings. In modern times, however, the implication of virtue, as well as its relationship to the existence, has changed. Virtue, no matter in the context of English or of Chinese, is more similar to moral character or moral disposition. When talking about virtue nowadays, people think of diverse special categories of virtue such as kindness, kind-heartedness, justice, righteousness, honesty, self-control and tolerance. The specialty of categories of virtue embodies certain characteristics of human beings while its diversity various dimension of human existence. As virtue splits into categories of virtue, the integration of human existence becomes a crucial issue.

The multiple attributes of a human being as a moral subject are by no means separated but always constitute a unified structure. In spite of the diversity of its manifesta-

2 Wang Fuzhi, *Collected works of Chuanshan* 《船山全书》, Changsha, Yuelu Shush 岳麓书社, 1991, Book 6, p. 439.

tions, virtue, as a specific form of existence, demonstrates the unity of a same moral subject. Such a unity appears as personality. As for an individual, whether its personality is good or bad serves as a synthetic standard to judge its moral realm. Personality is different from special moral character since it embodies the spirit of human existence as a whole. Virtue, in the form of personality, unites and restricts the daily life of a human being. Further, the integrity of virtue is ontologically founded upon the integrity of human life. The integrity of virtue and the integrity of human life are complementary and interactive in the historical practice in the life world.

The unity with the entire existence of a human being provides stability for virtue. Although it is not innate but acquired from experience, virtue functions as stable disposition, or even invariable “second nature.” Virtue does not change with changeable situations. The invariance of virtue in variable situations just shows the stable tendency in virtue. As a specific individual, a human being always evolves in a process. However, the subject is always the same “self” as a real life as well as an internal personality. Just as a life continues to exist in metabolism, so does an intrinsic personality in efflux, which shows the relative permanence of virtue. **509**

Virtue will lose its ethical significance if separated from the existence of a human being. We can ask such a question: Why is virtue always good, or positively valued? It cannot be answered from virtue itself. The foundation of virtue has to resort to the existence of human beings. The question

why virtue is good logically relates to another one, which involves more directly the existence and development of a human being: Why is virtue necessary? Human beings are always pursuing perfection in multiple dimensions. On the one hand, virtue does not only reflect the state of human nature but also restrict its development; it does not only determine the direction of the spirit but also affect conduct choices. In short, virtue, as internal personality controlling the entire existence of a human being, makes up of a condition, for the multiple development of a human being. It is thanks to the connection between virtue and existence that virtue is always good, or positively valued. From the ontological and axiological perspectives, the existence of a human being possesses originality and priority.

510

The relationship between self and others is a background for the accomplishment or development of a human being. Ethics has to face the self-others asymmetry, which is essential to the well-accepted doctrine that morality is for others. Stressing the priority of others over oneself or even the self-sacrifice for the interests of the others, the asymmetry constrains or even denies self, which has some tension between the accomplishment or development of a human being. Consequentialism attempts to release this tension in its seeking interests as great as possible, that is, the pursuit of self-interests is right if such interests will bring goodness to greater extent.³ However, this approach is open to discus-

3 See *Virtue ethics: a critical reader*, Daniel Statman ed., Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 130-1.

sion. if greater interests could be taken as the criterion, then one's conduct, if it would result in greater interests, could legitimately damage others.

Another possible approach to overcome the self-others asymmetry is to affirm the significance of virtue. Perfect virtue, according to *Zhong Yong*, is the realization of self-value on the one hand and the affirmation of value of others. As an index of the whole existence of a human being, virtue is not only the unity of all attributes of a person but also the unity of self-achieving and the achieving of others. Both the internal integration of self and the mutual achievement of self and others demonstrate the unity of virtue and existence.

Virtue, as an unity of human existence, has its own structure. In moral practice, virtue presents good intentions in a form of stable disposition rather than accident or reluctant wills. A person with real virtue will pursue his or her moral target; choose goodness over wickedness in any situation. He or she will not commit wickedness when he or she is alone and free from external regulations.⁴ His or her conducts are characterized by “for oneself” rather than “for others”. In other words, what he or she conducts is not for the sake of admiration of his or her external “moral image” from others but to achieve self-realization of virtue based on sincerity. **511**

4 The *Great Learning* (《大学》) does emphasize the significance of virtue to being alone when it, in explaining the idea of “making the will sincere,” advocates that the superior man will always be watchful over himself when alone.

As good disposition, virtue has an orienting quality. Moral practice not only requires the use of goodness for direction, but is also involved with issues such as “What are good conducts?” and “How can one conduct in a good way?” To practice moral consciously, one has to know moral norms, which can provide general criterion for the choice and valuation of conducts. However, conducts always take place in concrete situations, which are beyond the control of general moral norms. Without a correct understanding of the situation, a person, who even has a good intension and knows norms well, fails to conduct in a good way. Furthermore, what is also necessary is to know how to do, that is, to know the conditions and procedures of good conducts. Hereby, real virtue, which has overcome the form of abstract “ought,” always implies the ability to know what good is and how one conducts in a good way.

It happens quite often in real life: A good person sometimes makes bad choices due to faulty knowledge. We shall discuss this moral phenomenon called “good people do wrong things,” which nowadays has been taken by ethicists as an example to question virtue ethics.⁵ First of all, we must make a distinction between “a good person” in an ordinary sense and “a virtuous person” in a strict sense. A good person is a person with a good intension. On the contrary, a virtuous person, as discussed above, must have not only a good intension but also enough knowledge such

5 See Robert B. Louden, “On some vices of virtue Ethics,” in *Virtue ethics: a critical reader*, p. 184-5.

as moral rules and concrete moral situations. It is because of the combination of good intention and good knowledge that virtue is excellent. In this regard, to be a good person is insufficient to be a virtuous person.

Besides the intention to be good and the ability to know what good is and how one conducts in a good way, virtue also has its emotional dimension. In real life, a person who has virtue will have different emotional reflections to and emotional experiences of different motivations and consequences. If he or she is not motivated by virtue, a virtuous person will regret and have a guilty conscience after re-thinking their actions. If the action or conduct causes a bad consequence, he or she will feel deep regret. After accomplishing a good conduct, he or she will often feel self content and pleased. he or she will naturally agree with other people's good conducts but reject their bad conducts. Self consolation, self reprise, self guilt, self content and other emotions constitute also some stable disposition in virtue. Emotions by themselves seem to be neutral. For example, love and hate are neither virtuous nor evil in an abstract sense. However, concrete emotional experiences can be judged as right or wrong. The sympathy for the misfortune of others is a healthy emotional response while taking pleasure in others' misfortune is unhealthy. The emotional elements in virtue should always be healthy so that his stability and righteousness of emotions are fused in virtue.

513

To sum up: as a mental form of human existence, virtue has an interrelated structure made up of a stable disposition of intentions and emotions on the one hand and the

ability to make rational analysis and obtain moral knowledge on the other hand. All these elements of knowing, feeling and willing in the structure of virtue cannot be fully understood merely from the perspective of psychology. Emotion, will and rationality in virtue always have certain moral content. For example, a good intention, the ability to know what good is and how one conducts in a good way, and emotional acceptance demonstrate a mental tendency to pursue goodness. Virtue, as a structure with good disposition, constitutes a spiritual subject and consequently an intrinsic foundation for moral practice. Of course, virtue, as the foundation of moral practice, is not a priori and permanent. Virtue is historical in accordance with the historically of an individual in a society.

II

Moral conducts are based on virtue, but they must simultaneously obey common norms. Virtue, taking a moral subject as its bearer, is directly involved with human existence. On the contrary, norms are not restricted within but go beyond a moral subject. However, virtue and norms are not totally separated from each other in spite of their different relationships with a moral subject.

Virtue is in most cases integrated in personality. Each cultural tradition has its own ideal examples of personality. For example, Yao 尧, Shun 舜, Yu 禹 and other sages in ancient China. Despite of some mythological elements in them, these ideal personalities do embody virtue and reflect historical needs at any given period of time. Yao de-

mises his position to wise and virtuous Shun rather than to his own son. It shows a doctrine that one should concern *tian xia (the world)*, the whole cultural world, much more than a family, which is necessary for social order and stability. In the story of combat with a flood, Yu demonstrates a great spirit of perseverance, which is indispensable to struggle with nature. Similarly, the bravery and fearlessness of the heroes in Greek epics are important mental factors for survival at the time of frequent war among tribes. Looking through the mythological veil, we can see the connection between ideal personalities and historical needs. Virtue in ideal personality is chosen in history. In other words, characters in accordance with historical needs have been so repeatedly affirmed and confirmed that they cohere ideal personalities in history.

515

The specification of virtue in ideal personalities provides a premise for the formation of norms. Moral norms reflect historical social needs and also show common moral ideals, which are based on social reality and take their specific forms in ideal personalities such as sages. Compared with norms in a concept system, ideal personalities, united with concrete human existence, have some ontological priority: Ideal personalities exist before the appearance of abstract moral norms; norms system originates to some extent from ideal personalities in history. In fact, norms in a concept system can in some sense be understood as the abstract and advance of ideal personalities as ideal models of existence, which can guide and direct society members.

However, the originality of virtue in real personality cannot be overstressed. From the priority of human exis-

tence, personality as a unified form of virtue is more original, but this does not mean that virtue is completely beyond moral norms. There are always norms of conduct that reflect the social conditions of a particular historical period. In the beginning, these norms do not take a form of a conscious system. They are embodied in customs, habits, etiquette and taboo, etc. Ideal personalities in early civilizations do provide a basis for moral norms, but on the other hand they are affected by values and social trends. The fearlessness of heroes in ancient Greece reflects the social value of martial culture. The character of self-sacrifice in Yu's combat with a flood reflects the priority of a collective and its strength in a period when people possess limited capacity to conquer nature. Furthermore, ideal personalities in history are a result of re-creation: People always confirm or give prominence to some virtue of ideal personalities according to their value principles and corresponding norms. In both original and re-created ideal personalities we can see their close connection with norms.

To sum up: Virtue and norms are prerequisite for each other in a historical process. On the one hand, virtue, in the coherence of personality, constitutes a real base for norms; on the other hand, norms influence the formation of ideal personalities from the perspective of social values.

We have just discussed the relationship between virtue and norms from the historical point of view. Logically, moral norms, as a general rules of conduct, are always beyond any particular individual. Moral conducts, however, are carried out by individuals. How can general moral

norms transfer to concrete conducts of individuals? This is involved with more intrinsic relationship between virtue and norms.

The differentiation of goodness and wickedness is a logical premise for moral practice. The differentiation forms in a process of moral knowing, which aims to know what is, that is, to distinguish goodness and evilness, to grasp ethical relationship and to understand norms. Knowledge of what is does not logically imply what one ought to do, just as David Hume has mentioned that we cannot infer Ought from Is. The dichotomy between factual knowing and evaluation is open to discussion, since the affirmation of goodness implies factual knowing. However, Hume has an insight into the logical distance between to conduct in a good way and to know what is good: knowing what is good does not promise doing in a good way.

517

Norms imply oughtness and thereby the differentiation between goodness and evilness: In affirming what ought to do and what not, norms affirm what is good and what is evil. However, general norms are always beyond and external to any individuals so that they, in spite of their sublimity, may not be accepted voluntarily by individuals. In addition, norms, as general laws, are always heteronymous to individuals.

How can we infer to conduct in a good way from to know what is good? In other words: How can we assure the validity of general norms in moral practice? Here we must give prominence to virtue. The socialization of an individual is to some extent a transformation from nature to vir-

tue. In other words, virtue helps a person become a social being from his or her natural state and consequently advance to be a moral subject. Contrary to general norms, virtue embodies intrinsic features of an individual. However, virtue in some sense results from the transformation of external norms: By influences of environment, education, rational cognition, emotional and voluntary acceptance, external norms gradually merges with internal moral consciousness, which becomes stable virtue in moral practice. While norms represent external social demands to individuals, virtue issues from moral consciousness internal callings of conducts. The relationship between individual existence and virtue is more intimate than between individual existence and norms: Virtue constitutes self personality unifying knowledge, emotion and will; virtue essentially is an intrinsic form of individual existence. If conducts come from virtue, an individual demonstrates his or her own existence rather than obeys external social demands passively. It is virtue that unifies to know what to do and to do what ought to do.

518

From the relationship between norms and conductors, norms take a form of social restriction as “you ought to do,” virtue “I ought to do.” For conductors, “you ought to do” tells some external commands while “I ought to do” self demands, which can be regarded as the result of synthetic functions of intrinsic virtue structure based on mental disposition consisting of good intentions, the differentiation between goodness and evilness, emotional acceptance of goodness and emotional rejection of evilness.

In the form of “you ought to do,” conductors are subjected to requirements while in the form of “I ought to do,” conductors are subjects. Without the transformation from “you ought to do” to “I ought to do,” it is impossible to achieve autonomy by overcoming heteronomy.

Logically, a conductor’s following moral norms requires a basic premise that he or she is willing to be a moral person. This tendency towards goodness constitutes such an internal commitment of a conductor that moral norms boast sanction for him or her. Without, For a person who has no good intentions and consequently no commitment to conduct in a good way, moral norms make no sense. He will by no mean have a guilty conscience or condemn themselves. In this sense, we may say, since the tendency towards goodness is a premise for obeying norms, a moral system is suppositional by characteristic: If you choose or promise to be a moral person, then you should obey norms. Because the tendency towards goodness results from internal mental disposition of virtue, virtue serves as a premise for norms.

519

Of course, to affirm that virtue provides real assurance for norms does not mean to negate the restriction function of norms themselves. Norms, as a unified mental structure, contains general regulations, for which willingly acceptance of norms is indispensable. In fact, the formation of virtue is simultaneously a process of self-building in accordance with norms. Norms dominant at certain time not only restrict human conducts but also influence the feature of personality. Li Gou (李觏) says, “If we guide peo-

ple by learning and restrict people by proprieties, their virtue will be accomplished.”⁶ Similarly, Zhang Zai (张载) emphasizes the unification of grasping a system of norms with transforming nature to virtue: “It is necessary to be held by proprieties when virtue has not been achieved”;⁷ “Dao and righteousness result from knowing proprieties and accomplishing virtue.”⁸ The acceptance of norms will help to avoid an egoist possibility of virtue. For Aristotle, the link between “justice” and “lawfulness” means the link between virtue and law since justice is “a complete virtue.” Therefore, the connection of justice with lawful implies the connection between virtue and laws.⁹ As compulsory norms, laws share some similarity with moral norms.

520 In this sense, the connection between virtue and laws affirms that between virtue and norms. Such understanding of Aristotle, who is considered as one of the most important thinkers of virtue ethics in history, shows that virtue and norms are not absolutely exclusive.

Generally speaking, common norms are required to maintain social order and cohesion, and to achieve necessary justice of conducts. Common norms are significant operative instruments, which provide basic guidelines for

6 Li Gou, *Collected works of Li Gou*, Zhonghua Shuju, 1984, p. 66.

7 Zhang Zai, *Collected works of Zhang Zai*, Zhonghua Shuju, 1978, p. 264

8 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

9 Wang Fuzhi, *Discussions after reading the great collection of commentaries on the four books (Du Sishu Daquan Shuo 《读四书大全说》)*, v. 1, *Collect works of Chuanshan 《船山全书》*, Book 6, Chansha: Yuelu Shushe 岳麓书社, 1991, p. 439.

not only conducts but the evaluation of conducts as well. The formation of virtue is a long-term process. Becoming a virtuous being is a higher and more difficult achievement than simply understanding moral norms. Hereby, following norms is just a primary demand so that just following external norms as a baseline is not enough for both individuals and the whole society: It is impossible to reach perfect morality and the function of external norms in reality lacks internal assurance. In short, common norms are indispensable to the guide and evaluation of conducts whereas virtue is indispensable to real validity of common norms.

The unity of virtue and norms also can be seen in the unity of norms and diverse special categories of virtue. In Confucianism, its core moral ideas are “benevolence” (*ren*, 仁), “righteousness” (*yi*, 义), “propriety” (*li*, 礼), “wisdom” (*zhi*, 智) and “truthfulness” (*xin*, 信). These are norms when regarded as requirements of conducts and criteria for evaluation of conducts. For example, Confucianism advocates “to practice benevolence” (*wei ren*, 为仁) and “to practice righteousness” (*xing yi*, 行义). In addition, Confucianism also interprets these ideas as intrinsic virtue and character: So-called “a man of benevolence” (*ren zhe*, 仁者) refers to a subject who has the virtue of benevolence. On the one hand, a person forms its intrinsic “benevolence” in “practicing benevolence” under the guide of the norm of “benevolence”; on the other hand, basing on virtue, he or she carries out moral practice of doing goodness and rejecting evilness. In practice “benevolence” as a norm and “benevolence” as a special category of virtue are united together. Similarly, justice, as a key concept in the west-

ern tradition of ethics, is both a norm and a special kind of virtue of a subject.

Virtue, including specific categories of virtue, always has a tendency toward goodness, which is naturally positive in value. Take benevolence as an example. It implies always taking others as purpose and being good-willed to others. However, a tendency toward goodness means just a possibility rather than a reality. In some cases, virtue could lead to a negative outcome. For example, benevolence, in spite of its orientation toward goodness, would not be good if one deals benevolently with those who are harmful to society (or enemies of society). In order to avoid the negative alienation of virtue and help virtue transform from possibility to reality, we need not only take hold of all aspects of virtue, that is, the unity of the tendency to do good deeds and knowing what is good (including distinguishing goodness from evilness, analyzing concrete situations of conducts) but also emphasize the significance of norms in guiding virtue, which also shows the relevance between norms and virtue.

522

III

Virtue is involved with both norms and conducts. At the first glance, virtue seems to be more relative to “what we should be” while norms have a closer relationship with conducts since norms prescribe “what we should do” and how we can make evaluation. However, this does not imply that conducts and virtue are disconnected. Just as virtue and norms are integrated, so are “what we should do” and “what we should be.”

Virtue, which is real in itself, can be seen as an intrinsic authentic self. However, “intrinsic” does not mean that self is constrained in the self. Although a self is an intrinsic personality, it demonstrates itself in external aspects. Similarly virtue exists both in an intrinsic mental structure and in real conducts. Just as external norms should be transformed into intrinsic virtue, so should virtue be transformed into virtuous conducts. As a matter of fact, the achievement of virtue and performance of virtuous conducts are united in the existence of a same self in the world. As far as its origin is concerned, virtue cannot be accomplished without virtuous conducts. Wang Fuzhi, a Chinese philosopher in 17th century, says, “By virtue we mean what is acquired in mind in the process of conducts.”¹⁰ Virtue, as an intrinsic personality, always has the problem of how to confirm itself. While the formation of virtue (“what is acquired in mind”) is based on “virtuous conducts,” the self-confirmation must go beyond spiritual enjoyment so as to confirm itself in virtuous conducts.

523

The external confirmation of virtue is also a process of externalizing virtue. Authentic virtue is always both intrinsic and externally-demonstrating. The externalizing and objectifying of virtue is in daily life besides great conducts. Morality always extends to all aspects of social activity while any moral subject lives within some determi-

10 Wang Fuzhi, *Commentary on Zhang Zai's Correction of Youthful Folly* (*Zhangzi Zheng Meng Zhu* 《张子正蒙注》), *Collect works of Chuan-shan* 《船山全书》, Book 12, Chansha, Yuelu, Shushe 岳麓书社, 1992, p. 72.

nate social environment, which the subject has no power to choose. Therefore, moral practice is always involved with both the determination of environment and the indetermination of conducts as well. The power of virtue lies in the fact that virtue is able to in determinate environment affect daily life, influence the life world, and give it new meaning so as to arrive in the realm that daily life embodies Dao.

As a form of existence, virtue firstly is mental disposition, or even good mental disposition to some extent. However, the value of mental disposition is still potential since it merely means a possibility to conduct in a good way. The fullfillness of virtue lies in conducts: The transformation from virtue to virtuous conducts means virtue becomes reality in practice. Virtuous conducts, as the realization of virtue, can take quite a few forms while virtue also embodies in all aspects of human existence such communication in daily life and material production.

The transformation from virtue to virtuous conducts means the confirmation of virtue in reality by overcoming virtue in potentiality. Certainly this is not the whole story: Virtuous conducts must take virtue as its internal foundation. The world is so complicated and the situations are so changeable that it would be difficult to keep consistency in conducts if following changing situations in the world. Only if we always guide ourselves with virtue can we maintain goodness in various circumstances. As a sincere personality, virtue presents an intrinsic unity of self. In this sense, virtue is one. On the contrary, virtuous conducts are “many” because they manifests in multiple forms

in various social situations. The control of virtue over virtuous conducts can be understood as one-over-many. It is intrinsic virtue of self that assures a good tendency in various conducts of a subject.

Virtue, as a mental structure, contains not only a good disposition but also an ability of knowing goodness, which refers to grasping moral norms, analyzing concrete situations, combining norms and situation, solving moral problems, and so on. In other words, virtue, which includes conduct mechanism and evaluation system, can not be simply understood as good intentions. Moral norms mainly prescribe what should do in most cases, but they do not tell us how to apply norms in a particular situation. The analyses of situation, the application of norms in situations, rational deliberation and volitional decision—all of these depends on the moral subject and thereby his or her virtue.

525

If virtue is understood as an entire mental structure rather than some attribute, the abstract of the relationship between virtue and conducts can be overcome. The entirety of virtue is not only a unity of practical spirit but also a unity of virtue and entire human existence. Because of these two kinds of unity, virtue has an ontological significance in moral practice: Virtue provides guides for conducts and controls conducts by permeating all aspects of activities of a subject.

This doesn't mean to deny the function of norms in concrete moral issues. However, concrete moral issues usually often relate to the flexibility of moral norms, which has been discussed in the debate over *jing* (universal princi-

ples), principles and *quan* (adjustment of principle), expedience in Chinese philosophy. Mencius is again the shortage of expedience while he advocates returning to principles. Furthermore, Wang Fuzhi discusses the interaction between principles and expedience in a context of subject as well as his or her consciousness:

Only if we know general principles so as to keep them in mind, then we can conduct in this situation without disturbing other situations. Generality must be held in variability while variability must be held in generality. It is called mystery if the great function of the practice is in accordance with what is held in mind.”¹¹

526 By General principles Wang means in some sense common norms. To know general principles so as to keep them in mind is to transform common norms into conceptual structure. The unity of generality and variability in the interactivity of principles and expedience, which, according to Wang, is based on what is held in mind, that is, internal conceptual structure. In this way Wang emphasizes the significance of intrinsic mental structure in the process of knowing goodness.

The connection of virtue and conducts is also reflected in solving concrete moral issues. As far as Confucianism is concerned, the important debate over knowing and acting relates also to the relationship between virtue and conducts. For Confucianism, Knowing is mainly knowing of virtue and the interaction between knowing and acting means

11 Wang Fuzhi, *Commentary on Zhang Zai's correction of youthful folly* (*Zhangzi Zheng Meng Zhu* 《张子正蒙注》), *Collect works of Chuan-shan* 《船山全书》, Book 12, Chansha: Yuelu Shushe 岳麓书社, 1992, p. 72.

the cultivation of virtue in practice on the one hand and the transformation of virtue into virtuous conducts. Wang Yang-ming claims, "The task is to successfully perform virtuous conducts." He also advocates to "extend good conscience in my mind to all things; Good conscience in my mind implies heavenly principles. If good conscience in my mind is extended to all things, then all things acquire their principles."¹² By all things Wang Yangmming means various moral issues such as ethic relationship. Good conscience can be regarded as intrinsic virtue because it is individual moral consciousness, whose contents are heavenly principles, that is, general norms. To extend good conscience in my mind to all things is to apply moral consciousness in moral practice, a perspective of transforming virtue into virtuous conducts. The fact that all things acquire their principles is the manifestation of intrinsic virtue in an ethic world. As far as mind and principles are concerned, such a process is the establishment of moral order in the externalization of mind. As far as virtue and virtuous conducts are concerned, such a process is the objectification of virtue in ethical relationships through virtuous conducts. Traditional Chinese ethics has emphasized the practice character of intrinsic virtue and the control of personality over virtuous conducts.

527

Virtue restricts conducts not only in its good disposition but also in its endowment of particular moral significance to conducts. If a moral conduct is merely in accordance

12 Wang Yangming, *Collected works of Wang Yangming*, Shanghai, Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992, p. 45.

with moral norms, then we may say it is “not wrong” since such a conduct is characterized by spontaneity. If a moral conduct results from understanding and autonomously following of moral norms, then it can be called “right.” To a considerable extent, to do “right” thing is the baseline of ethics because it is the primary obligation for any society member to obey moral norms. Besides “not wrong” and “right,” another word we can use to evaluate a moral conduct is “admirable.” An admirable conduct derives from intrinsic virtue of the subject, which makes it different from a conduct just according with or following norms.¹³ Negatively speaking, a conduct which is “right” or “not wrong” can avoid condemnation or accusation while positively speaking it is “granted.” On the contrary, it is not enough to say that an “admirable” conduct avoids condemnation or accusation is “granted” because it manifests the innate power of virtue and embodies the truthful personality of a moral subject.

A moral conduct consists of its motivations and consequences and both of them are open to moral evaluation in the external society or in the self-reflection of the subject. If he or she is aware of good motivations or positive consequences of his or her conduct, the subject possesses a moral judgment as well as a moral experience based on self-af-

13 In discussing the relationship between virtue and obligation in *The methods of ethics*, Henry Sidgwick claims that some virtuous conducts perform more things than obligation, which makes them admirable. However, we don't think everyone that has corresponding capacity is obligatory to perform them.

firmation and self-realization. The subject then feels self-confident and self-sufficient, which will become enthusiastic forces further in moral practice. On the other hand, bad motivations and passive consequences usually result in such negative emotions or condemnations of conscience as self-accusation, regret and guilt, which function as a particular moral sanction. This sanction, realized in self-evaluation, is a very important internal mechanism for moral practice in restraining the realization of bad motivations and avoiding the recurrence of a subjective fault with negative results. Logically, moral self-evaluation as well as moral incentives and sanctions requires intrinsic virtue in a subject. In fact, the evaluation of motivations and corresponding results is always intertwined with good intentions, the judgment of goodness and evilness and emotional acceptance of goodness and emotional rejection of evilness. It is because of good disposition that good motivations and results produce self-sufficiency while immoral motivations and results produce self-accusation, regret and guilt.

529

Resulting from virtue, a moral conduct is not only conscious but natural, especially in the formation of a specific motivation. Mencius tells us a story: If seeing a child falling into a well, anyone who has any moral consciousness will spontaneously run to save it the child without deliberation. In this case, the motivation is a natural response as an inevitable outcome of good disposition in virtue. A perfect moral conduct is characterized by consciousness, that is, to obey rational norms consciously, willingness, that is,

originating from internal will, and naturalness. It is in the unity of these three qualities that a conduct is autonomous and consequently achieving a higher-level realm, which are ontologically based on virtue. Just as the *Doctrine of the mean* (*Zhong Yong* 中庸) says: “A person with authentic virtue is in accordance with norms without efforts and without deliberation. He walks in the way of Mean at leisure.” Efforts and deliberation are unnecessary since general norms has been deeply rooted in consciousness and consequently transformed into the second nature of a subject. Because of authentic virtue, the subject goes beyond the rational compulsion and intended efforts into a realm of nature. In this way, realm of conducts (virtuous conducts) and that of personality (virtue) are fused with each other.