

# Introduction

## A Particular Sort of Rationalist Humanism

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The works collected and translated here culminate a prodigious effort—the effort with which Li Zehou met our third millennium. In them, and especially in the concluding essay on “History, Ethics, and Metaphysics,” Li gives the final word on his “ethics.” This ethics, as I understand it, is an ultimately humanist project: Li affirms actual living humans to be the fundamental source of morality and insists we take into account the specific, empirical conditions of human life in deciding what principles to live by. So rather than a didactic or exhortatory argument promoting humanist ideals or principles, Li argues for a comprehensive view of morality that is humanist in its structure and orientation.

Below I draw in broad strokes some basic elements of these ideas as put forth in the writings that follow. Many were first elaborated in the foundational essays of Li’s *Ethics*, originally published 1999–2004. The dedication he thereafter poured into elaborating these views and their implications shows how dear they were to his heart, as well as the urgent philosophical and social import he assigned to them. Those original statements of Li’s moral philosophy were collected alongside subsequent explication as his *Ethics (Lunlixue gangyao)* in 2010,<sup>1</sup> which became part of Li’s larger *Outline of a Philosophy (Zhaxue gangyao)*, published the following year.<sup>2</sup> Therein, Li prioritized *Ethics* in presenting his overall philosophy, placing it first in *Outline’s* tripartite organization of Ethics,

Ontology, and Epistemology in both the original and later expanded editions.<sup>3</sup> That grander philosophy offers much beyond Li's moral theory, but is also deeply integrated with it. Even a basic understanding of Li's ethics intertwines with his broader views on human existence and understanding. But there and across much of his published work, Li's ethics takes pride of place. Most importantly, elaboration of these views, and especially their uniquely rationalist and humanist dimensions, poured forth in recent years through Li's ever-impressive industry.<sup>4</sup>

The texts in this volume were originally published 2014–2019 and culminate that prolific rush. As with the foundational essays on ethics, these recent works bear less on specific questions of ethical conduct (substantive rules for how we should or should not act) and more on how to understand and approach those questions in the first place. In them, Li pushes us to see that our vision of human values and morals, of ethical acts and moral principles, occurs through a lens of human psychology that is shaped by culture and history. Li guides us to critically examine that lens itself rather than just the moral landscape we see through it, and he induces us to adjust the lens to a more humanist tint.

Li Zehou spearheaded these later writings by elaborating his ethics as “A Response to Michael Sandel,” included as the appendix to this volume. But there Sandel, a major contemporary moral philosopher, functions mostly to offer a thin comparative framework for re-presenting and contextualizing Li's own views, and less as a true object of criticism. Why Michael Sandel? For one thing, Li tells us below that addressing “questions like those Sandel puts forth” is the “true task of philosophy”—a task largely lost in the more specialized inquiry that dominates the academic discipline today (*Response* §1.2). This makes Sandel a model philosopher, and also one of the relatively few scholars who engage in the same kind of discussion as Li. It probably doesn't hurt either that Sandel has risen to astronomical heights of popularity in Mainland China, not simply academic but among the broader public—and so matches Li Zehou here as well.<sup>5</sup> But most important, I expect, is that like the main thrust of Li's *Response*, Sandel's work forms a robust and sustained attack on modern liberal philosophies of individualism and rationalism. Their outlooks and agendas overlap. So what is Li responding to, exactly?<sup>6</sup>

Li insists we shift our basic approach to ethical questions and bid farewell to the typically modern search for abstract principles by which to reliably, rightly guide moral choice. Sandel's works of public philosophy—his bestsellers *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* and *What*

*Money Can't Buy* in particular—largely rehearse the familiar ways that modern philosophers have attempted to answer moral questions: Should we sacrifice the fat man to stop a trolley about to kill five people? Or is there a proscription from harming him that means the trolley should run its brutal, murderous course? Especially in *Justice*, Sandel uses this approach as a heuristic to examine the strengths and weaknesses of predominant moral philosophies, and in doing so he illustrates that none of the familiar lines of philosophical reasoning seem broadly successful. This dramatically, if unintentionally, illustrates part of Li's main point: that sort of purely rational, abstract, universalizing approach to moral reasoning fails us. We need to move beyond asking simply what principles—deontological or utilitarian—better guide our choices and which better align with moral intuition. Sandel gives us a bunch of ethical lenses to try out. Li wants us to consider where the lenses come from and why.

This is one important reason to have centered his discussion on Sandel. Another is to more precisely frame his true targets of criticism and praise. Sandel offers arguments that, like “communitarians” generally, criticize liberalism while remaining to some extent philosophical bedfellows with it. Li intends to do the opposite. He affirms rather than rebukes liberal principles and liberal tradition: though hardly infallible, the tenets of liberalism are of tremendous value and should be broadly implemented, affirmed, and prioritized. But he wants to graft these onto a new philosophical foundation, one based in concrete human life, its situated history, and its emotional relations. Here Li is often much closer to Sandel than he lets on.<sup>7</sup> Both fundamentally reject the individualist Kantian conception of the self. But Li wants us to turn our sights further, and perhaps even in a different direction, than Sandel—toward the classical Confucian outlook of an “emotional cosmology,” “emotion as substance,” and the integration of emotion and reason in Chinese virtue ethics. The contrast with Sandel's turn toward republican and Aristotelean conceptions of virtue, which remain relatively individualist and tend to oppose the passions to reason, helps more sharply distinguish and precisely delineate the finer points of Li's arguments.

Li's refined elaborations of these views in “On Ethics” and “Further Comments on Ethics” were published following a series of symposiums held in 2014 (the year *Response* was published) in which Li deployed the ideas of *Response* in the style of Sandel himself, as public philosophy. At open forums with students and professors in Shanghai, Li discussed Sandel's examples within the framework of his own philosophy.

His published comments, translated below, bring out Li's insights, concerns, and clarifications in reflecting on those discussions so as to better elucidate ideas central to his *Ethics*: the nature of moral psychology, the Confucian conception of the self, the distinctively Chinese tradition of virtue ethics, the pervasive but implicit influence of Xunzi's philosophy in Confucian tradition, the contemporary importance of classical Confucianism, the shortcomings of sociobiologist explanations of morality, and other themes broached in *Response*. Li is relatively systematic in these comments compared with the freer dialogic style of the rest of this volume, and in this more organized manner he develops select points of his ethics—those of particular importance and continuing relevance—in novel and illuminating ways.

The crown jewel of these short texts on ethics is “History, Ethics, and Metaphysics.” In many ways it presents a distillation of the core points of *Response* and *Ethics*—their ultimate maturation and refinement. The dialogue—this time with an actual, real-life interlocutor, Liu Yuedi 劉悅笛 (in *Response* Li poses the questions to himself)—is informal and loosely structured. It is itself the maturation of public, published discussion between Li and Liu that has been ongoing for years.<sup>8</sup> Here the ethical role of “emotion” so highly emphasized in *Response*, although still crucial, takes a backseat to Li's rationalism and concrete historicism. The dialogue centers on his argument that “metaphysics” and the “*a priori*” are constructions of human reason that arise historically through lived human culture. In elaborating this, Li brings forth new dimensions of his theory. For one, he adds emphasis on Mencius's “tremendous contribution” to his affirmation of traditional Chinese “emotional cosmology.” Having long celebrated the thought of Xunzi, a main philosophical rival of Mencius, Li here “tops off” his philosophy by lauding core dimensions of Mencius's moral teachings. He also renounces the label “Marxist,” which he has long given himself. For those familiar with Li's oeuvre, this is a dialogue of fireworks. It has depth, color, and excitement to boot.

The texts below thus have a particular chronology to them, and their interconnections trace the path and crescendo of Li Zehou's culminating work on ethics. The later texts give increasingly refined expression of the arguments of the former. They are also richly informed by the former and fully grasped only in light of them. At the conclusion of the final dialogue, Li expresses that he is content to leave it all at this: he has said what he has to say on the issues. We have here a tremendous finale.

As a testament to the fruitfulness and import of these ideas, Li's ethical philosophy is steadily receiving increased international attention among scholars of philosophy. The most recent scholarship on his thought bends more toward discussion of Li's ethics than previous Anglophone collections—consider the articles in Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia's edited volume on *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* and in the recent special issue of *Asian Studies*.<sup>9</sup> The most recent monograph on Li Zehou, Jana S. Rošker's *Becoming Human: Li Zehou's Ethics* (Brill, 2020), devotes itself to his ethics.

For scholarly biography and overviews of the broader academic work on Prof. Li, readers will do well to look to (in no particular order) Roger Ames and Jinhua Jia's Introduction to *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, Jana Rošker's "Li Zehou and His Time" in *Following His Own Path: Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* and "Li Zehou, His Life and Work" in *Becoming Human*, Andrew Lambert's Philosophical Introduction to *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*, my own introduction to Li's *The Origins of Chinese Thought*, and the entry on Li Zehou in the *Biographical Dictionary of the People's Republic of China*, among the other great resources available.<sup>10</sup>

Now to outline and briefly contextualize some defining components of Li's ethics. I will focus in particular on those he gave special attention in recent years and those that bear most importantly on the discussions collected here. Beginning with the unique bent of his rationalism, and sketching the moral psychology and the theory of the constitution of morality that support it, I go on to review how Li thereby affirms both the relativity and the absoluteness of moral norms, and then the humanism foundational to all of this.

## Rationalism

Li is an ethical rationalist, but in a manner very different from the sort predominant today. Preeminent contemporary theorists like Derek Parfit, T. M. Scanlon, and Thomas Nagel offer rationalist accounts of morality that adjudicate moral questions through weighing "reasons," that is, through cognitive assessment of "reason-giving properties or facts" of the world.<sup>11</sup> Li sees morality as a matter of exercising reason in a different manner, one more traditionally Kantian.<sup>12</sup> For Kant and Li, the exercise of

moral reason is a matter of choosing which maxims to act on. Practical reason operates in the will choosing to act on maxims one sees as universally legislative, making *moral* acts exclusively and distinctively driven by reason. Li is in this way a proper rationalist in the manner of Kant: morality occurs exclusively in the acts of a universally legislative rational will, a will that sees itself acting on maxims valid for all.<sup>13</sup>

But Li also revises Kant's conception of reason with several unique twists. These revisions are part of the broader theory of moral psychology and the constitution of morality that Li brings up often in the essays in this volume. In his moral psychology, emotion and reason interrelate in various complex ways. The texts in this collection often mention the "three elements of morality"—ideas, emotions, and the will, or the cognitive, affective, and conative—which Li's ethics shares with traditional Chinese moral philosophy. Li emphasizes that the three are never fully separable from one another.

I continue to happily follow the classical way of putting this, primarily in terms of the three elements of *zhi* 知, *qing* 情, and *yi* 意, associated with ideas, emotions, and the will, respectively. Each of these three, moreover, itself has conceptual, emotional, and willful aspects, and the three are also mutually interpenetrating. Knowledge consists primarily in ideas, aesthetics primarily in emotions, and morality primarily in the will. These consist in diverse connections, structures, modes, and schema that are formed by diverse neural pathways, networks, and signals, all of which operate in a variety of ways on a variety of levels. (*Further Comments*, Comment 6)

This integrated complex of thought, feeling, and action make up what Li refers to summarily as the "emotio-rational structure," emphasizing the integration of emotional with rational elements that constitute the human mind and moral psychology.

As far as I can tell, we can say that while emotion is one of the three elements of morality, reason is a matter of the other two. Li distinguishes the "content" of reason from the "form" and "force" of reason. The *form* and *force* of reason are conative, a matter of governing action through the will. How the will is exercised is determined by the *content* of reason, made up of ideas, especially ideas about good and bad. These tell reason how to direct the will. The thing is, under this view, reason

itself is sufficient for morality, leaving one of the “three elements of morality” seemingly nonessential: Since morality just is when reason exercises control over the will, when the will is effectively directed by our ideas about good and bad, why then does Li include emotion as one of the elements of morality?

One reason is this: Emotions are part of morality in that morality involves rational governance of them. But also, among the more important ways in which the elements of moral psychology interrelate is that the rational elements shape emotions in a uniquely human way, so that the kind of naturalistic feelings and impulses that predominantly drive the amoral behavior of other animals become rationalized, so to speak, in humans. These moral emotions can then provide “ancillary” motivation for moral action, alongside the rational force of the will. (Note how this diverges from Kant, for whom the only *moral* emotion is reverence for the rational moral law.) In this view, then, reason primarily and directly drives moral action through the will, but it may also indirectly motivate moral action through shaping our emotions. In any case, we can say that since the moral human mind includes emotions, they make up one of the elements of morality—despite being nonessential to moral action.

Endorsing the complex integration of affect and reason also allows Li to make further powerful and prescient moves as a moral theorist, for example, in response to intuitionist challenges to rationalism. Intuitionists argue that moral truths cannot be rationally explained. Rather, they reveal themselves through intuited judgments: we just know that murder is wrong. We do not (and do not need to) reason to this conclusion; and we do not have to (and in fact cannot) give adequate reasons why. This challenge is prevalent in Confucian philosophy, both traditionally and today. The Neo-Confucian teachings of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) argue for intuitive access to the good through each person’s inherent capacity of moral conscience, challenging the influential doctrine of Zhu Xi 朱熹 that we should seek moral truth through “investigation of things” (*ge wu* 格物). A similar view is adopted also in the modern New Confucianism of Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and others. The modern New Confucian views thrive in philosophy departments today, especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and their followers maintain substantively Neo-Confucian lines of argument in attempting to criticize Li on this and other fronts. Intuitionism has also recently risen to prominence in the field of moral psychology, led most of all by Jonathan Haidt’s demonstrations of moral dumbfounding.<sup>14</sup> These experiments seem to show that

reason is not in fact the source of people's moral judgments: we rely on moral intuitions, which rational justifications generally chase—when we bother to come up with such justifications at all. If reason neither determines our moral views nor adequately explains them, as these theorists hold, then moral rationalism has little ground left to stand on.

In the psychology literature, a powerful response to this has gained increasing traction. It argues that our intuitions themselves are internalizations of rational norms. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons's "morphological rationalism" accepts the intuitionist debunking of traditional psychological rationalism: our judgments most often do not result directly from moral reasoning. But it questions the assumption that moral intuitions in no way rely on moral reasoning or principles. Horgan and Timmons affirm "an important and perhaps ineliminable role for moral principles in people's moral judgments" in that rational principles become "morphologically embodied" in our cognition and thereby "operate automatically" as intuitions.<sup>15</sup> This is precisely the view on moral intuitions Li Zehou has given for several decades, sometimes in response to New Confucian intuitionist challengers—and which he gives again in the articles below. When we act on intuitions, Li tells us, we are in fact acting on rational maxims. It is just that they have been internalized in ways that shape our intuitive responses. This accords with common moral experience, and the psychologists show it may have serious scientific legs.

It also has important implications for moral philosophy. This offers a novel form of rationalism that works in tandem with intuitions as well as emotions in driving moral behavior. But while emotions and intuitions have these valuable moral functions, Li maintains that only reason—as the will acting on rational maxims—makes us moral. Thus Li also stands opposite other more radical advocacy of the moral importance of emotion, such as Michael Slote's sentimentalism, which argues for direct and constitutive roles of empathy in moral determination (and against viewing morality as a matter of reason—although Slote is mostly concerned with the weighing-reasons version of rationalism). Yet like Slote, Li draws us strongly toward a more inclusive and affective view of the human psychology that houses morality's maxim-based reason, one in which emotions, the will, and ideas interpermeate. Li himself states that this affirmation of "the complex relations of emotions and reason" intends to "avoid simply collapsing the source and motivation for ethics and morals into either reason or emotions" (*Response* §3.5). Li's description of moral psychology not only precedes a now increasingly important theory in psychology; it



also furrows new ground between rationalist and anti-rationalist moral philosophy, doubling down on reason's centrality to morality while also drawing moral emotions and intuitions into the picture.

But the relatively robust role Li depicts of emotions and intuitions in moral psychology is not, after all, the only or even the most important way in which he incorporates emotion into morality. There is another, greater role for emotion, one that more fully demonstrates the depth to which he sees emotion and reason as interrelated and mutually constitutive: reason is ultimately based in emotion. While reason shapes and governs emotions within moral psychology, it also originates from and has its grounds in the sensible, concrete experience of human life. Since this life is made up of emotion—of felt experience shared among human beings—the broader interrelations of reason and emotion occur also on a second level.

### The Basic Schema of Li's Ethics

Li diagrams the basic ways emotion relates to reason in a general schema of his ethical theory. Figure I.1 is a simplified early formulation of that schema, which he fittingly calls a diagram of four arrows.

At the middle of this diagram is a reciprocal relation between “ritual regulations” and reason. “Ritual regulations” refer mainly to the “external social norms” and “ethics” Li discusses much in the dialogues below, and the arrow from it to “reason” depicts what Li below calls the movement from external to internal and the movement from ethics to morality. It is also where “history enters metaphysics” and ideas generated through human culture are taken to be *a priori* in individual psychology. Li has explained:

The second arrow moves from ritual to reason . . . as the transformation of external ethical norms, customs, order, institutions, and standards into concepts of right and wrong and good and evil within the individual. This involves rational, cognitive knowledge. In this process, religious leaders and philosophers often elevate reason from the empirical to the

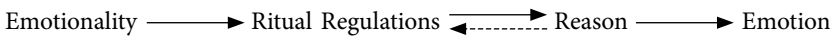


Figure I.1.

*a priori* and transcendent in the form of orders or principles from God, innate conscience, pure reason, the true nature of the cosmos, and so on. (*Response* §3.5)

This relation has primary emphasis in Li's philosophy, and readers will encounter it often in the texts collected here.

We should note the arrow in the opposite direction, as well, which indicates that the "reason" of individual humans also influences shared social norms: reason can and does tell us how to structure society and treat one another, and communicating and enacting our personal thinking publicly shapes our shared "external" ethics. This arrow is obviously important: it includes most of our moral and political theories, in that they take reason as our starting point in telling us how to live. This arrow is thus also obviously very well attended to, and Li wants to call our attention to the less recognized flow of determination in the opposite direction, from social conditions to how we reason. While celebrating the important role of our reason in guiding action and social institutions, the model pushes us to keep in mind the broader conditions from which those ideas, values, and principles arise and in which they function meaningfully and positively (or not).

To do this, Li emphasizes the rightward direction of movement not only in this middle relation from social norms to reasoning. He also dramatically widens its scope, adding "emotion" (*qing*) on either side. Because "emotion" has two different meanings on the two sides, the general schema translates it as emotionality on the left and emotions on the right. Li succinctly but summarily states the entire left to right movement in the schema as follows.

I continually emphasize the importance of history and education throughout my work. Ritual regulations are produced through the historical lived existence of emotionality and instilled into individuals as reason (concepts of good and evil) through education, which allows the free will to govern emotions. (*Response* §3.5)

Actual, historically situated human life gives rise to the patterns and order of social life. The regulations of that order are then internalized in individual psychology as reason, and that reason governs emotions in the individual. So it all starts from "the historical living existence of emotion-

ality.” Li famously calls this, among other things, a theory of “emotion as substance” (*qing benti* 情本體).

But how exactly are we to understand “emotionality”?

“Emotionality” (*qing* 情) here includes human emotions and desires, but is not limited to these. It refers more broadly to the circumstance (*qingjing* 情境) of the living existence of the entire community, which is interrelated with individual emotions and desires. (*Response* §3.5)

“Emotionality” here refers to the circumstances and conditions of life for humans (both individuals and communities). It is situation and context (*qingjing* 情境) as well as emotions and desires (*qinggan* 情感, *qingyu* 情欲). Emotions and desires are inseparable from actual life situations, and these situations are likewise inseparable from the human emotions and desires present in them (primary among these being the desire for life itself). (*Response* §2.1)

Human life is historical and composed of living, breathing, acting, feeling humans. “Emotion” as “emotionality” refers to the relational fabric of this life, composed of sensible experience.

The felt experience of social life, of interaction with the environment and with one another, is the original substance in and through which the patterns, order, standards, and norms of human life arise. Those patterns and norms in turn constitute the source and grounds of knowledge, reason, and morality. This is an idea Li identifies in early Confucianism, often citing recently unearthed bamboo texts that tell us “rituals are generated from emotionality” and “the Way begins in emotionality.” The communicable patterns and norms of actual, historical, situated human existence are internalized in individual psychology and shape the way we live, and at the far-right side of the model they govern how we feel. And of course, the ways we each individually live and feel partly constitute the collective relational fabric, and thus in more elaborate diagrams Li draws a light dotted line all the way back from emotion on the right side, as “individual emotions and desires,” to emotionality on the left side, as shared sensible existence (*Response* §3.5; see the General Schema of Ethics in *Response* §2.2).

In this we also see that the model of four arrows emphasizes that emotion and reason are deeply social in their constitution.

Individual psychology is thus formed through cultivation by social norms. When children learn language, they are really learning behavioral norms of social life, or the “rules of the game.” This is why Wittgenstein rejects psychologism and individualism. In terms of ethics, this is my model of “four arrows.” Both “emotionality” as interconnected emotional circumstance and the individual’s personal experience of cultivated “emotions” have essentially social aspects. (*Response* §3.7)

Li also calls his theory one of “relationism” (*guanxi zhuyi* 關係主義), and here we see his “relationism” is closely integrated with conceiving of “emotion as substance.” Li aims to draw our attention to the foundational importance of the actual felt experiences and interrelations of human lives and their shared forms of life.

Li in these ways emphasizes our situated sociality and emotions and places them in positions of fundamental importance. He does so without opposing this situatedness and emotionality to rational individualism—an opposition common in contemporary moral and political philosophy. In fact, rationalism and individualism both take a front seat in Li’s ethics, while the ground on which he affirms their value is precisely the relational and emotional nature of human life. Reason serves this life. It drives morality and is our greatest tool for increasing human flourishing. The morality of modern individualism, moreover, provides “content” for reason that is especially conducive to the flourishing of that life. This is also one of the central arguments of Li’s ethics: the affirmation of modern liberal individualism as a set of morals promoting collective human flourishing. The model of four arrows presents a framework for endorsing those morals that is quite different from the modern liberal theories through which they arose and continue to be debated. In Li’s philosophy, we cannot ask which is more important: emotions and relations or reason and individuality. The model of four arrows, in its movement left to right, helps establish that reason and individuality are valuable precisely through the more fundamental importance of emotions and relations in constituting human life.

### History, Ethics, and Humanism

Li endorses the core Kantian notion that we ought to treat “humans as ends.” But he does so in a novel way, one that breaks from Kant on deep

levels. The principle of humans as ends does not constitute a universal and timeless moral law, but rather is merely a core premise of “modern social morals.” These morals and their view of humans as ends are objectively good in modern society, but not necessarily beyond that. This is because moral principles are, Li argues, products of history. They become normatively valid within particular social conditions, and the conditions of our particular era validate the basic principles of liberal individualism. How is this, you ask? Their objective goodness is grounded in the fact that, given the circumstances of modern life, these modern moral principles serve human flourishing.

This leaves our morals with no further grounding beyond human life itself. And since human life is historical—lived in particular times and places, through particular cultures and technologies—shifts in the conditions of human life affect morality. Li writes, “Ethics is attendant on history” (*lunli congshuyu lishi* 倫理從屬於歷史).<sup>16</sup> Of course, ethics also shapes, creates, and constitutes history in turn. Our shared and particular ethical beliefs and practices form our ways of life and thinking. So history and ethics are mutually constitutive. They also shift together across place and time, from culture to culture.

Li in this way affirms moral relativity in the sense that ideas about right and wrong, the “ethical content” of reason, may be affirmed in certain times and cultures and conditions and not in others. No moral principle applies uniformly across all human conditions. “Even Kant’s idea that people should be treated as ends in themselves cannot be affirmed as a universal law or ethical principle in some circumstances.”<sup>17</sup> Li sometimes gives examples of exigent circumstances,<sup>18</sup> but the thrust of his ethics regards larger shifts in cultural institutions, technologies, material conditions, and most importantly, shared morals. We see this where he writes, “within a long-established slave society, the manner in which a slave lives as a means is in line with the historical conditions of that particular society’s understanding of morality.”<sup>19</sup> Now one may want to object: “On the surface of it this may be true, as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. That a bunch of people somewhere, somewhen, agreed that slavery, or murder, or torturing babies is okay does nothing to show that these things were in fact okay. Such a society’s understanding of morality could have been—and from the standpoint of modern morals certainly was—simply wrong.” Li has something more in mind, however: “Compared with tribal warfare in primitive societies, where enemies were simply killed, the ancient use of slaves was less cruel. This was a major historical advancement, and in this way can be seen as just” (*Response*

§2.1). Li sees humanity as historical, and reason and morality serve the advancement of that history. Would it have been better if there was never any slavery? Yes. But history is a process by which actual humans under difficult and often tragic conditions have together developed and deployed their capacities to improve their lot. Those conditions have varied dramatically across time and place, and therein ethics and morality have played important roles in navigating as well as reshaping the conditions of human life. Since this and only this provides the context in which moral norms are meaningful, we should move away from seeing standards of good and bad or right and wrong as uniformly applicable across different cultures and eras, or even across different situations within a single culture and era. We understand and evaluate them better with an eye to historical circumstance.

As we see from the passages above (and in the works that follow), human reason has developed to address matters of situated human life, and the advancement of morality is a main component of our attempts to remedy problems and overcome concrete challenges. Despite occasional failures, the overall thrust of reason and morality is toward improving human life. It is fitting, then, that the broad trend of historical change in our morals has been one of progress—of life getting better.

The ruins of ancient Rome show areas where people battled and were often eaten by animals. At first the masses found great pleasure in watching the mauling of early Christians. Later, when Christianity became the state religion, the same stands were filled with cheering Christians who supposedly held a doctrine of love. Would this be possible today? (*Response* §3.9)

It is here that Li's relativism most fully kicks in, and also where it gives way:

Ideas of good and bad differ across times, cultures, and religions, and these changes possess historical particularity and cultural relativity. However, through the long processes of history, the various cultures, religions, and societies of humankind also gradually accumulate universal and absolute ethical ideas from within these relative and particular concepts of good and bad. For example, we have progressed away from murder and exile of the elderly in primeval tribes and away from murder of cap-

tives, women, and children in war. Female infants are no longer drowned and female feet no longer bound. This shows that not only does internal will possess absoluteness, but external ethics also accumulate absoluteness. (*Further Comments*, Comment 5)

There has been scientific advancement and improvement in the material conditions of human life. And there has also been progress in the content of moral reason, the ideas of good and bad by which we navigate and structure our relations. These advances can be affirmed in so far as they overall serve to advance human wellbeing and flourishing.

Such progress is not linear. Sometimes there is digression, and sometimes advances in the overall human lot come at a regrettable cost. Li describes this in terms of an “antinomy between history and ethics,” telling us, “Humans will get many things wrong. When we make these mistakes we gain experience and strive to correct things. This is precisely the pursuit of the ‘Way of heaven’ within history” (*History, Ethics, and Metaphysics*, “Philosophy with Humans”). As Li likes to say, “History proceeds in the midst of tragedy.” (He deploys both these conceptions of antinomy and tragedy often below, sometimes together.) Or more dramatically, “History always takes evil as leverage, progressing on a winding path through filth and blood.”<sup>20</sup> But overall we see overwhelming evidence that our collective wellbeing and happiness have advanced through the muck, distress, sorrows, and regrets of history.

Li mentions two forms of moral absoluteness, that internal to individual psychology and that of shared social ethics. I understand these to be matters of the two components of moral reason, the “formal force” of the will and the “content” of ideas of good and bad. The formal capacity of the will takes its content, ideas of good and evil, categorically. When the will deems something right, it deems it absolutely right, which gives it motivating force: deeming it absolutely necessary, the will acts on it. This accords with moral experience, and it gives an account that neatly distinguishes the motivational force of the rational will from emotions (even moral emotions) and desires. It also explains the special overriding force we attribute to moral judgments relative to other judgments of good and bad. The internal will possesses absoluteness in that ideas of right and wrong become absolute for the individuals who hold them.

Internal absoluteness is simply the nature of morality, or moral psychology. Thus Li says that terrorists also “possess morality.” But their morality, so to speak, is mistaken. This is because their ideas about good

and bad are bad. Their notions of right and wrong are wrong. Li is a relativist, but not in the “anything goes” sense. In what follows, Li writes:

The particular social and communal norms that individuals abide by in their various times (represented as the solid line from ritual regulations (*li* 禮) to rational principle (*li* 理) on the general table of my ethical theory) along with their divergence from and opposition to these norms (the table’s dotted line running back from rational principle to ritual regulations) are what regulate the course of history. One cannot judge the past me by reference to the present me. . . . The problem is, within the broader recognition of such moral relativity is a type of “unrestricted moral relativism” that sees various incommensurable ethical norms as entirely equal in essence and value. This precludes evaluative distinction as to what is superior and inferior, better and worse, advanced and backward, and makes drawing such distinctions politically incorrect. It thereby also rejects the accumulative nature of history and its affirmation of historical progress, including that of morality and ethics. Such progress is especially clear when it comes to women. Whether or not women have a right to education or can work outside the home or freely marry or choose abortion are all examples. (*On Ethics, Kant, Ethical Relativism, and Virtue Ethics*)

Li derides “postmodernists” in particular for failing to see that ideas about right and wrong “possess absoluteness” in this external sense. Such anti-Enlightenment opponents fail to see that absoluteness is “accumulated” within and through the concrete conditions of relative morals.

So, relying on the existential value of morality to actual humans, Li affirms the absolute value of particular morals for particular circumstances. Insofar as shared morals contribute positively to the conditions of human life, we can affirm diverse and even mutually opposed morals when applied in different circumstances. Importantly, we can also reject certain morals for those circumstances, if they do not contribute to human flourishing. So even when certain morals become absolute for particular subjects or groups, that does not mean they are good. We can still (“absolutely”) judge those morals to be wrong, misguided, bad, evil. Li’s examples of genocide, suicide bombers, self-immolating activism, and traditions of foot-binding fit here. So even within his thorough affirma-



tion of cultural relativity, morality is understood both as absolute for the individual and as having an objective external standard.

The theory of accumulated absoluteness affirms that uneven but cumulative historical improvements in the conditions of human life evidence progress toward greater flourishing. Historical shifts in people's moral values and standards, Li argues, are part and parcel of this improvement. This evidences moral progress. The modern social morals of Enlightenment humanism are objectively right because they support conditions of modern life in which human wellbeing thrives. We should uphold these morals and extend them to those realms of life where humanist values remain all too absent: "the modern social moral of 'humans as ends' is, in regard to the entirety of humankind, still far from fully realized" (*On Ethics*, Kant, Ethical Relativism, and Virtue Ethics). But this is not the end of history, and the values and principles of modern social morals are not the last word. Li insists on nuance and a pragmatic outlook: There are so many factors to navigate as technology and social change advance—bio-engineering, artificial intelligence, big data, and surveillance—that it is uncertain how far the outlook of liberal individualism, and specifically its manner of conceiving and valuing our selfhood, will hold going forward (see *On Ethics*, *The Self*).

The value or end I call "flourishing" Li himself most often refers to as the "continuous extension of the living existence of the totality of humankind" (*renlei zongti de shengcun yanxu* 人類總體的生存延續). I find the extremely literal rendering of "continuous extension of living existence" most accurate—more accurate, anyway, than the more comfortable option of "survival," because this extension is much more than survival. It is historical and cultural expansion: the inheritance and development, enlargement and enrichment of human life in its social, cultural, and psychological dimensions rather than in a merely biological sense. It reflects Li's openness to change in the conditions of human life and values. There is not one aim or good to human life, because that good shifts with progressive changes in the conditions of human life. And this is part of the reason there can be no universal, eternal content to the categorical imperative. "According to my anthropological historical ontology, 'categorical imperatives' are based in the empirical living extension of the totality of humankind, and not in 'heavenly principle,' 'God,' or 'pure reason.'"<sup>21</sup> And Li's "totality of humankind" is not an abstract notion of "humanity": "What I call the 'totality of humankind' is inseparable from the specific ages, societies, and communal groups of particular times and places."<sup>22</sup> It

refers always to the concrete living existence of humankind as such, *in toto*. This precludes notions of organismic unity or holism common to other ethical visions, including other versions of Confucian humanism. One does not and cannot see oneself as holistically interconnected with this whole. Instead, Li explains, one sees individual members of this totality as “good” and to be valued in their contribution to—as components of—its “continuous extension.”

Professor Li himself offered a model of the human flourishing his ethics promotes for all. Let me thank him here for all he accomplished, for his ideas and insights, and for the inimitable diligence and patience with which he shared with us those insights. Thank you, Professor Li, for your outsized contribution to our human totality. I end my comments here, and let Li speak for himself in the rest of this volume.

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