

The Global Ethics of Emotions – What Ancient Chinese Philosophies Can Teach Us

Diogenes
2022, Vol. 64(1–2) 29–33
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DOI: 10.1177/03921921221080814
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



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Abstract

This article explores what ancient Chinese philosophies can teach us about understanding emotions and relating to them. It posits that emotions are fundamental and connected to everything in the universe, that much of their value lies in their sincerity, that they need to be cultivated to avoid excess and imbalance, and that, like everything else, they are permeated by a cosmic force that is at once transcendent and immanent.

Keywords

emotions, ethics, correlative thinking, self cultivation, transcendence

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That global ethics is not restricted to a particular place goes without saying. It should be equally obvious that global ethics is not restricted to a particular time. It is an ethics for humanity. By cutting across space and time, however, we cannot expect to come up with ready-made solutions for the specific challenges of our times, such as the pandemic, climate change, or immigration. Instead, we may strive for what might be called a “deep” ethics, built on general principles underlying human behaviour.

Our topic is emotions. I will try to show how browsing through ancient Chinese philosophies can teach us something of arguably universal value about how to *understand* emotions as well as how to *relate* to them. I will argue that there are at least five points worth considering.

Emotions are fundamental

The first point is simple: Emotions are fundamental. Chinese philosophers must have realised this when they began to use the character 情 (*qíng*) to denote emotions, sometime in the 4th century BC

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(e.g., Puett 2004). Like its near relative 精 (*jīng*), this character has ‘essence’ as one of its meanings. Emotions are essential to being a human being, whether they are referred to with the single character 情 (*qíng*) or with composite phrases such as 喜怒哀樂 (*xǐ nù āi lè*), “joy and anger, sorrow and pleasure”.

According to Axel Schuessler (2007: 433; 459f.), 情 (*qíng*) may be etymologically related to 生 (*shēng*), “life/live; fresh/raw”, and thereby also to 性 (*xìng*), “human nature”. And indeed, the fundamental quality of emotions is underlined in the view that they emanate from human nature, from 性 (*xìng*), or alternatively from 氣 (*qì*), ‘cosmic energy’, both of which are generated by 天 (*tiān*), Heaven. For Mencius, who believed that human nature is good, emotions (or at least affective qualities) lie at the basis of all moral virtues. For Xunzi, who believed that human nature is bad, and who is sometimes portrayed as having a negative view of emotions and desire, the sage is nevertheless one who “nourishes his heaven-bestowed emotions” (養其天情, *yǎng qí tiān qíng*).

It is a long-worn cliché to say that the Chinese focus on emotions represents an alternative to the sometimes excessive emphasis on thought and reason in European philosophy. It is less of a cliché, but equally valid, to say that it represents an alternative to the excessive belief in the power of thought in contemporary cognitive psychology. At the same time, the Chinese view is by no means un-reason-able, the way Western Romanticism and the New Age movement often end up being.

Emotions are connected

The second point is that emotions are connected to everything. Ancient Chinese philosophers gradually developed a correlative world-view in which all things followed the patterns of 陰 (*yīn*) and 陽 (*yáng*) and the five phases (五行, *wǔ xíng*, see Graham 1986). In this worldview, joy and anger are not merely related to laughter and shouting, which is easy to understand, but also to red and green, to the heart and the liver, to fire and wood, and to south and east, all of which seems much less intuitive.

The details of this worldview are not interesting in the context of a global ethics, and during the Han dynasty the whole system tends to become absurdly complex and mechanistic. However, the emphasis on relations, not only within the human sphere but just as much between the human and the natural spheres, provides an early form of ecology, including both an ecology of mind and an ecology of things, in which may be seen a combination of a humanistic and post-humanistic spirit.

Emotions are sincere

The third point is more specific: Emotions are sincere. Indeed, the character 情 (*qíng*), “emotion”, is sometimes glossed as 誠 (*chéng*), “sincere, sincerity”. In the *Analects*, Confucius is quoted as saying:

上好信，則民莫敢不用情。

When a ruler loves trustworthiness, then none of his people will dare not to be sincere.

In one of the 4th-century BC texts that were unearthed in Hubei in the 1990s, *Xìng zì mìng chū* (性自命出), the sincerity of emotions is much celebrated, mainly because it generates trust:

凡人情為可悅也。苟以其情，雖過不惡；不以其情，雖難不貴。苟有其情，雖未之為，斯人信之矣。

In general, feelings are delightful. If things are done with feeling, even wrongdoings will not be deplored. If things are done without feeling, even difficult achievements will not be valued. If you have feelings, people will trust you even before you have started to do anything.

The sincerity of emotions comes from their spontaneous nature, the fact that they are not something we have deliberately acquired by learning. As the *Book of Ritual* (禮記) says:

喜怒哀懼愛惡欲七者，弗學而能。

Joy and anger, sorrow and fear, love and hate, and desire, these seven are things of which we are capable without learning them.

This reminds us once again of the etymological relation between 情 (*qíng*) and 青 (*qīng*), “green, fresh, young” and 生 (*shēng*), “life, vitality, raw (uncooked)”. Emotions represent sincerity and genuineness precisely because they are raw and fresh and full of youthful vitality.

This view of the sincerity of emotions reminds us of studies in contemporary psychology showing that thoughts and feelings that come to us spontaneously are judged to be more genuine, more telling of who we really are, than thoughts and feelings that we harbour by deliberate choice (Morewedge & Giblin 2014).

Emotions need cultivation

The fourth point, however, may seem at first sight to go in the opposite direction: emotions are in need of cultivation. If we follow any whim of joy or anger, sorrow or pleasure that enters the mind, the result will not be good, and it will be even worse if we wholeheartedly pursue whatever joy and pleasure can be had, at the expense of things that make us angry or sorrowful. All excess is bad for us. As one of the wise men quoted in *Zuǒzhuàn* (左傳) tells us:

淫則昏亂，民失其性。

Excess leads to chaos, and people lose contact with their nature.

Or, to quote Confucius, the way he is rendered in the *Huáinánzǐ* (淮南子):

樂極則悲。

When pleasure reaches its utmost, it turns into sadness.

The suggested methods for cultivating emotions are integral parts of ancient Chinese culture: ritual, music, song, and even the reading of documents. They can hardly be directly transferred to contemporary and global needs, but I suppose a modern liberal education, perhaps supplemented with meditation rather than ritual, could play a similar role in contemporary society.

It is worth noting, however, that avoiding excess is not primarily about suppressing or repressing particular emotions. On the contrary, it is about keeping a balance that would combine both sides into a pair of opposites, such as, for instance, joy and anger or sorrow and pleasure. In this sense, the point is to accept rather than reject the flow of spontaneous emotions.

Transcendence

The fifth and final point regards transcendence. For while the Way, 道 (*dào*), is an immanent force that permeates all existence, it also represents a transcendent force that goes beyond all its

material or phenomenal expressions, including human emotions (see Brown and McLeod 2020). The “Inward Training” chapter of the *Guānzǐ* (管子) makes it clear that the Way goes beyond both speech and the senses:

道也者，口之所不能言也，目之所不能視也，耳之所不能聽也，所以脩心而正形也。

As for the Way, it is that which the mouth cannot speak of, the eyes cannot see, the ears cannot hear, that by which one cultivates the mind and aligns the body.

It sometimes sounds as if emotions have no place in the life of a person who has realised the Way, that for such a person, “sadness and pleasure cannot find a way in” (哀樂不能入也, *āi lè bù néng rù yě*, see *Zhuāngzǐ*, “Yǎngshēngzhǔ”; “Dàzōngshī”). The point, however, is not to rid oneself of emotions but to avoid being limited by them, “not to wound one’s person because of one’s likes and dislikes” (不以好惡內傷其身, *bù yǐ hào wù nèi shāng qí shēn*, see *Zhuāngzǐ*, “Déchōngfú”). The forever fluctuating nature of “joy and anger, sorrow and pleasure” (喜怒哀樂, *xǐ nù āi lè*) needs to be accepted in the same way that we need to accept that in our lives, “success and failure, poverty and riches” (窮達貧富, *qióng dá pín fù*) often lie beyond our control, and that this is even more true of “death and life” (死生存亡, *sǐ shēng cún wáng*), which may be taken as the ultimate test of our ability to accept change. According to Zhuangzi, the author of the phrases just cited, these changes between opposites “alternate before us day and night” (日夜相代乎前, *rì yè xiāng dài hū qián*), and “no one knows from where they spring” (莫知其所萌, *mò zhī qí suǒ méng*). Without saying so explicitly, he is pointing towards the Way from which they spring. The Way not only lies beyond our senses but is also inaccessible to rational knowledge.

In the modern world, our contemporary godlessness has problems accepting the existence of anything that we cannot see or hear or touch or taste or smell – or even know. We live by the principle of WYSIWYG: what you see is what you get, and there is nothing beyond. Thereby, however, we also lose a measuring rod by which to relativise our emotions and see them in proper perspective. We lose the motivation for going beyond the much too celebrated pursuit of happiness, and we easily miss out on messages coming from anger, worry, sadness and other less happy feelings – either our own or those of others. For if God is indeed dead, and there is no Confucian Heaven or Daoist Way, too much meaning tends to be invested in the immediate feeling of well-being and, conversely, in avoiding pain or hardship.

If, as I have argued here, emotions are indeed fairly fundamental, closely linked to human nature and even cosmic energies, and if they are ecologically connected to everything else, and if they represent a kind of sincerity and genuineness but are in need of self-cultivation in order for some emotions not to be drowned in our excessive indulgence in others, then the recognition of some form of transcendent force seems to me to be of vital importance. It will not solve all our contemporary challenges with covid-19, global warming, and human migration, but by stimulating a way of life that is less dependent on immediate gratification and constant enjoyment, it will encourage a greater degree of ethical responsibility – towards ourselves, humanity, and the planet. Such is my last point.

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