

7th Rutgers Workshop on Chinese Philosophy
An International Conference on “Moral Conflict in Early Chinese Philosophy”
April 10-11, 2025
New Brunswick, NJ, US

Summaries of the presentations are produced by the workshop rapporteurs, Frederick Choo and Esther Goh who are doctoral candidates at Rutgers University Department of Philosophy. The order of the summaries follows the conference schedule.

“Beyond the conflict of black and white: human agency in the Zhuangzi” - Karyn Lai (University of New South Wales)

Karyn Lai presented a narrative account of what it means to be human in the *Zhuangzi*: humans with the capacity to put ourselves in conflict with *tian* or, by contrast, to mitigate the heaven-*tian* breach. She notes at the outset that she will propose certain interpretations of various key Zhuangzian terms though this is not meant to deny alternative interpretations.

The first theme is the idea of obliterating *tian* (the heavenly). Lai discusses two passages that talk about the human treatment of horses. One speaks of harnessing horses while the other of cruelty to them. These passages might seem to say that we should stop all actions relating to our treatment of horses as they are not the way of *tian*. However, she argues that the main takeaway lessons are (i) that cruelty must stop and (ii) (the more important message) that, as humans, we have to engage in human activities. However, we have to be careful about our motivations, that they do not go wrong. Else, we are letting what is human obliterate *tian*.

After discussing the idea of *tian* and Zhuangzi’s main idea that the world is ever changing, Lai turns to discuss thievery metaphors. Zhuangzi says, “Are not all the so-called perfect sages just bodyguards for the great thieves?” Lai argues that he says this because the sages are instilling a culture of compliance, imposing constraints on other humans. This is robbing the people of their own active engagement with *tian*.

Next, she discusses the idea of using *tian* (in us) to match *tian*. She uses a passage where Qing the bell stand maker engages in fasting and says that they forget that they have four limbs. She interprets this as the person forgetting distinctions—they are forgetting a most basic category, even of their own “four limbs.” The forgetting enables the bell stand maker to openly engage with the trees in the forest, thus using the *tian* in him to match the *tian*-nature of the trees. Lai notes that the stories that Zhuangzi uses should be read as illustrations of paradigmatic life, which are nevertheless not universalizable. So, we can think about matching *tian* (in them) with *tian* only in the circumstances that we encounter.

The next theme is between animals and humans. In the *Zhuangzi*, animals are portrayed as doing things without reflection—they just do what they do. In contrast, humans are capable of higher-order reflectiveness, that is, with a capacity to know when and whether they are making *shifei* distinctions. A good example is Confucius who (in talking to Zigoing) says that other people roam outside the lines, but he himself cannot go beyond the lines.

The final theme is the metaphor of walking two roads (*liang xing*). Lai discusses the story of the monkey keeper who goes along with the changes. The metaphor shows that we need to be responsive to the transformations in the world in order to walk both the human path and the path of *tian* simultaneously.

“Han Fei Zi’s Critique of the Harmony Thesis about Moral Conflicts” – Tongdong Bai (Fudan University)

Tongdong Bai presents Han Fei Zi’s critiques of on the early Confucians’ harmony thesis about moral conflicts. For Mencius, all humans have compassion within them that just needs to be cultivated so that we can overcome our hostility to others. Although the compassion is universal, Mencius thinks that there is hierarchy of care that prioritizes one’s kin, then other people, and then other things. Conflicts of duties however do arise, example between one’s role as a king or judge and one’s role as a son. Mencius appeals to *quan* (weighing) in order to resolve and harmonize such conflicts. For example, a King stuck in such a situation can give up the throne.

Han Fei Zi rejects these ideas on multiple fronts. First, Bai argues that Han Fei Zi’s view of human nature is more complex: In the age of plenty, we can be kind to strangers and have compassion. But in the age of scarcity, our niceness goes away and we lack compassion.

Second, Han Fei Zi rejects the reliability of Confucian moral cultivation. Even though moral cultivation can work in some cases, it is not a reliable method and so not very useful. Han Fei Zi thinks that a more reliable method is to use rewards and punishments, appealing to people’s self-interest, to regulate society. Third, Han Fei Zi thinks that there is a fundamental irreconcilable conflict between the private and public life. This conflict cannot be overcome for common people through *quan*.

Fourth, Han Fei Zi thinks that the Confucian method is not reliable in the political realm. Even if the Confucian sages can successfully use *quan* to resolve the conflicts, there are too few of them in government. Furthermore, the masses cannot appreciate them. It is hard to win the heart and minds of the common people. Finally, there is a plurality of virtues in society since even moral experts do not have agreement on a set of moral values. So, even if moral experts can resolve moral conflict for themselves, their answer would conflict with other moral experts.

All of these lead Han Fei Zi to argue that the way to achieve harmony is to appeal to political institutions which have a system of reward and punishment. Harmony is not achieved through personal ethical effort.

“Anger as Situational Knowledge: A Daoist Analysis of Anger, Social Injustice, and Agency” - Ai YUAN (Tsinghua University)

Is anger the proper response to social injustice? Most of the debate on this question focuses on communicative anger — a form of expression that demands to be seen, heard, and acknowledged by others. It is a form of communication that criticizes the violation of moral norms and seeks to

correct the injustice done. Current debates center on the nature of anger as a speech act for communication, questioning whether its intended actions are ethically justified and practically effective in challenging social injustice. For example, some have argued that using anger is counterproductive as it alienates the other parties.

In contrast, Ai Yuan draws from the *Zhuangzi* in order to explore a different form of anger. Zhuangzi is skeptical about the value of communicative anger. In many cases, anger grows beyond one's control extending beyond the reasons we have to be angry, and we tend to attribute wrong intentions to others. Zhuangzi also did not advocate for showing anger to communicate and bring about change. Instead, Zhuangzi advocated for witty and humorous arguments.

Yet for Zhuangzi, anger should not be ignored. Yuan analyzes anger in the *Zhuangzi* by examining the story of the gardener and the story of the crippled Sentu Jia. She points out that the anger that they feel is not criticized. The anger helps to signal problems that exist in reality, such as ill-intentions or a violation of ethical norms. Yet, the anger is not directed to try to confront social injustice and does not motivate them to change reality.

Instead, the anger was used as situational knowledge. It helps people to understand the reasoning behind other's actions. People can then find hidden relations or reconstruct relations, embrace differences, and reorient themselves to relate to reality. The anger is not directed toward other people but used to serve one's forward-looking visions. In this way, anger is a necessary moment for people to search for meaning in life. Hence, anger as situation knowledge is still part of the good life for Zhuangzi.

“Tweaking the Recipe: Harmony with Dissonance” - Julianne Chung (York University)

In a pluralistic society where people and groups subscribe to different ideals of the good and moral life, is the Confucian ideal of *he* 和 (harmony) a viable ideal? And is harmony even compatible with accepting and encouraging differences and the freedom to think differently? Drawing from David Wong's work in “Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement,” Julianne Chung, like Wong, answers the two questions affirmatively. Chung, however, argues for a stronger claim – that disagreement (and hence dissonance) is necessary for, and not merely compatible with (as Wong argues), harmony.

Chung's paradigmatic cases concern sharp disagreements or exchanges that are embedded within a sustained, respectful relationship. On Wong's picture, harmony is compatible with disagreement because all disagreeing parties still have a shared understanding about the importance of the good of the mutual relationship, and/or the importance of the individual goods at play in a disagreement. Thus, there is still a shared, fundamental compatibility in the important interests of all disagreeing parties.

Chung, on the other hand, posits a more minimal conception of harmony. On her view, harmony fundamentally involves the capacity to acknowledge that there are differing points of view. Thus, disagreeing parties need not agree on the interests at hand. Harmony seeks not to reconcile disagreement into a singular point of view, or to eliminate differing points of view. According to

Chung, harmony can coexist with deep disagreement if all parties come to acknowledge that there are differing points of view. Chung provides the following example of harmony despite deep disagreement: Oftentimes, academic debates need not converge on a common consensus. However, this does not mean that harmony was not achieved. Even if these academics may still walk away with fundamental disagreements, we can still find harmony through their productive collaboration and discussion within the debate. Further, what explains the collaborative nature of these productive debates is the persistent acknowledgement that all parties have different points of view.

Chung also draws on the concept of self-decreation to illuminate how disagreements can be harmonized. Self-decreation shifts one's attention away from the self and instead seeks to be one with the world. For example, one may attend to the void. One may practice stillness and self-emptying attention. By being less attached to oneself, one is better able to handle views that differ from one's own.

Chung argues that one advantage of her view is that one can have harmony with a minimum of shared understanding and empathy. While one might think that this makes harmony less ideal, she thinks the strength of a more minimal conception is that it allows us to reconcile harmony with the idea that variety is worth promoting, and the idea that we can still achieve harmony even if we empathize more with one disagreeing party (or view) over another.

“When Moral Exemplars Cause Inner Moral Conflicts in Others” - Jing Iris Hu (Concordia University)

Jing Iris Hu proposes that there is a distinct type of morally transformative feeling, called “exemplar-induced shame”, which arises when one stands in comparison with moral exemplars who possess qualities that they find desirable. To illustrate “exemplar-induced shame”, Hu draws on three examples concerning lost property. In all three examples, one person acts imperfectly by taking property that is not their own, while the actual owner (i.e., the moral exemplar) responds to their act with grace. In all examples, the person who acted imperfectly feels shame in response to the grace shown by the moral exemplar.

Hu calls this type of shame “exemplar-induced shame”. Exemplar-induced shame share the following (non-exhausting) features: (a) one feels it when one stands in comparison with the exemplar, (b) one feeling inadequate and small, (c) is a result of being treated with kindness from the exemplar, (d) exemplar displays a moral ideal that one judges is achievable, (e) sparks a questioning of old moral ideals and wanting to align with the exemplar, (f) has motivational power, (g) not a result of facing external pressure to defend oneself from being lectured or reproached, but rather, self-motivated.

Hu argues that exemplar-induced shame invokes moral transformation because when we directly benefit from a virtuous act performed by a moral exemplar we want to emulate, their virtuous act implicitly affirms that we can be part of the moral community that we want to join and yet currently feel unworthy of. Their act also makes us keenly aware of the gap between our

imperfect conduct and the group's moral standard, and thus we will be motivated to reject our previous behavior, habits, values, and even aspects of our identity.

Hu's account of exemplar-induced shame reshapes the way we have traditionally discussed shame. While traditional accounts of shame argue that shame is solely a response to having failed oneself in some way, she argues that we might understand this type of shame to have a further dimension: as a desire for improvement. This reframes the role of others in shame – not merely as passive spectators who prompt self-examination, but as concrete, situated individuals whose relationships with us shape our experience of shame and moral betterment. Shame, on her view, enables the acquisition of new values; it allows us to look up to others, rather than simply look down on ourselves.

“Dangerous Certainties: The Mozi on Moral Convictions” - Hagop Sarkissian (City University of New York – Baruch College and Graduate Center)

Hagop Sarkissian examines the psychology of moral conviction through the lens of classical Chinese philosophy, focusing on the Mozi, a text compiled by followers of the philosopher Mo Di (墨翟, ca. 470-391 BCE). He argues that despite the vast cultural and temporal distance, Mohist philosophers have identified psychological patterns remarkably similar to what contemporary moral psychologists like Linda Skitka describe as “moral conviction”. Briefly, moral convictions are attitudes held with a sense of universality (i.e., driven by universally applicable truths), objectivity, and emotional certainty (i.e., felt as obligatory and fundamental, and is resistant to authority and social influence).

According to the Mozi, individuals have moral convictions naturally, and it is the individual themselves who deem what is *yi* (righteous). Furthermore, individuals have affirmed different things as *yi* and identify their own as correct. So, it is plausible to interpret the Mozi as stating that individuals have different moral convictions. The Mozi also predicts that such differences render living harmoniously untenable. This is backed up with psychological studies which show that people want to stay further away, both physically and socially, from people who have differing (and disagreeing) moral convictions. For example, a study done on pro-choicers and pro-lifers showed that each group chose to sit further away from each other the stronger their convictions were about abortion.

Now, what happens when our moral certainties blind us to the harms we commit? Here, Sarkissian argues that the Mozi can offer prescient insights into how moral convictions can create forms of moral blindness. For example, in its analysis of warfare, Sarkissian interprets Mo Di identifying and trying to make moral blindness visible to his readers. For example, the text begins with everyday moral convictions about how harming others is wrong – killing, even worse so. However, once mass killing occurs in the name of warfare, those same moral convictions go away; the people are morally blind.

Sarkissian proposes that moral recognition is more likely to be obscured with complex acts rather than basic acts. One may recognize that each individual basic act is morally wrong and have a

strong moral conviction as such, but when compounded and redescribed as a more complex act, one loses the moral conviction that the complex act is morally wrong.

Sarkissian then argues that the Mozi's solution to moral blindness recapitulates the very problem because the Mozi advocates against blind obedience to authority and permits different interpretations of the good. Instead, Sarkissian proposes that we should not resolve moral blindness with solutions motivated by our own moral convictions, but by recognizing the psychological forces at play in moral judgment.

“Harmony, Regret, and Temptation” – Stephen Angle (Wesleyan University)

According to Stohr's “harmony thesis”, a virtuous person should find virtuous action easy and pleasant because their feelings should be in harmony with her judgments about what she should do. In contrast, Stephen Angle defends an alternative view of the “harmony thesis” which permits the possibility of virtuous person's feelings of grief, but without regret or tragedy. To be clear, Angle does not claim that his view of harmony is the only possible Confucian viewpoint on moral conflicts. Rather, he seeks to show how the harmony thesis, while not univocally supported by all Confucians, remains a coherent and even attractive position.

Angle distinguishes the kinds of regret that non-sages and sages may experience; and explains why on this view, Confucian exemplars need not experience problematic temptation, contrary to Joonho Lee's recent argument. On Angle's view, sages may have pre-sage regrets, but these regrets have no forward-looking role. That is, the sense of regret that Stephen denies that sages can have is the kind in which requires the belief that they should have done otherwise. This is because sages imaginatively solve conflicts in a maximally balanced way and so do not judge that they should have done otherwise. Rather, the ‘regrets’ are more appropriately described as grief or a sorrowful longing that the world be otherwise; they are saddened by bad states of the world that they still ‘bear’. One might worry at this point that “grief without regret” seems to be a problematic ideal, because one may rightly wonder whether proponents of Angle's view must defend invulnerability as a value. To address this worry, Stephen argues that vulnerability, in a more general sense, is not opposed to the harmony thesis. This more general sense of vulnerability here is closer to ‘dependence’ or the reciprocal relationality underlying the need for deference.

On the other hand, non-sages can experience regret for not having achieved sagehood. However, Angle argues that non-sages should not see sagehood as an unattainable ideal but see the status of sagehood as an ideal that is continuous with and accessible (in principle) to non-sages at various points on the path of moral development (even though sagehood itself is extraordinarily rare). Thus, non-sages should aspire to work towards and often approximate the sage but would not experience extreme self-reproach for not having achieved it.

Bearing this in mind, Angle argues that “harmony” does not lead to political docility but actually supports political activism. This is because one traditional concern about Confucian political harmony is that harmony leads to docile acceptance of status quo. For example, Justin Tiwald has argued that there is an incompatibility of rights-claiming and Confucian harmony. However,

Angle thinks that there is a way in which to balance legal authority and moral or ritual. For example, we can come to see lawyers as moral heroes by associating rights-claiming with propriety.

Finally, Angle addresses whether harmony is inconsistent with temptation. Joonho Lee, for example, argues that the compassion of Mengzi's junzi leads to temptation. So, temptation seems like a price to pay for being virtuous. This leads to a dissonance between the sage's emotion and evaluative judgment. To address this, Angle first notes that Confucians would be friendly to situationism. Then, he cautions us against over-reading the phrase "stay out of the kitchen", as he argues that some non-junzi may be able to bear some killing. For sages, Xunzian "Fixity" limits the limits of malleability. Thus, Angle concludes that temptation is not a necessary outcome; one's raw emotions can become virtuous dispositions.

Angle concludes by emphasizing that his account of harmony does not depend on Ing's idea of "autonomy". One upshot is that his account allows for moral luck. Another upshot is that instead of adopting a "Sage-focused" approach, Confucians, by adopting his view, can adopt a "lived Confucianism" approach, where non-sages are working towards a rare, but coherent notion of sagely harmony, motivated by "life-long worry", yet without extreme self-reproach for not having achieved it.

"Weighing (*quan*) in early Confucian philosophy" – Dawid Rogacz (Adam Mickiewicz University)

David Rogacz urges us toward a more thorough investigation of the concept of weighing (*quan* 權) in early Confucian philosophy, showing how it can illuminate our understanding of moral dilemmas. Rogacz starts by clarifying some key aspects of what moral dilemmas are. First, moral dilemmas are not abstract conflicts; they are always someone's dilemmas. Thus, they are perspective confined. Second, while the 'conflicting' obligations are recognized as objective, the recognition is itself subjective. This is because it would be very unusual to think that anyone is facing a moral dilemma without knowing it. Third, in moral philosophy and psychology, moral dilemma occurs when people weigh competing values. Rogacz then argues that for values or obligations to constitute a moral dilemma, they must be mutually weighable or juxtaposable. He then notes that the weighing is not necessarily a balancing of two moral reasons. Finally, he observes that weighing not only dissolves dilemmas but constitute them.

Then, Rogacz demonstrated that the notions of *si* 思 and *du* 度, which are often interpreted as denoting powers conducive to finding 'ways out of' moral dilemmas in Confucian thought, were not attributed with such function. *Si* is an ability that helps uphold some obligations and relates to an inner discipline of heart-mind. *Si* not only helps with sticking to the right path during actions that are morally neutral, such as speaking and listening, but also uphold values in the face of temptation. *Si* can also be an ability to coordinate senses and the medium of sincerity or thinking about what should be done in advance (before action). *Du*, on the other hand, translates to 'measuring'. *Du* relates to objective procedures of measuring and standardizing and serves only as a metaphor for measuring one's conduct with some external measure.

Rather, Rogacz argues that it was *quan* 權 that the *ru* 儒 thinkers viewed as a procedure navigating through moral dilemmas and helping to obtain good (*shan* 善) and stick with Dao despite violating some moral norm (*jing* 經). For example, for Xunzi, *quan* is not restricted to moral choices, but all kinds of actions aimed at realizing what someone sees as beneficial or desirable. Thus, moral *quan* may be treated as a type of more general, praxeological weighing that compares and confronts reasons. A moral reason may be weighed against amoral reasons, and truly desired by the person according to their understanding of the situation. In some cases, *quan* leads to violating the general obligations, the rigid following of which would otherwise yield achieving something morally bad, thus going against the function of those requirements as conducive to good. While *quan* is fundamentally an open procedure, to which one will not know the results of, the proper *quan* should not lead to harming people. The way that we know our *quan* is proper, is *li*. For Liuqi, balancing deviates from the norm but is in accordance with the dao and opposes what is righteous but later results in goodness. Weighing consists in measuring with the help of a standard when it cannot be applied without any change.

“Harmonization as Self-Organization” – Mercedes Valmisa (Gettysburg College)

Mercedes Valmisa argues that harmonization (*he* 和) can be understood as a subtype of self-organization. Briefly, self-organization occurs when multiple entities interact to create order without centralized control, external direction, or intentional planning. Self-organizing systems display emergent powers—novel and irreducible to the lower-level components individually or in aggregation. For example, consider the flocking of geese in V-formation. The flock is materially and temporally dependent on the individual birds, but it can do things no individual bird can do on its own.

To explain how these novel powers are possible, philosophers have appealed to downward causation. While systems emerge bottom up, the properties of its lower-level components can become redefined or constrained when they are integrated into the whole system. For example, worker bee loses its capacity to reproduce when it becomes part of the hive. In self-organization systems, decentralized, local, non-linear interactions within an environment cause highly complex order and effective, collective behavior to arise. This, in combination with downward causation, explains the emergence of novelty and creativity that is key to harmony.

Consider, for example, greeting rituals. Behaviors within a ritualistic system are interconnected – one action triggers the next. Your act of extending your hand toward me triggers my response (i.e., to extend by hand toward you). Through our ongoing cooperation, a new order is created that is greater than the sum of you and I. So, we can explain how novelty (i.e., the creation of new conditions) arises in harmonizing systems. The emergence of this new conditions also combines dependence with autonomy. For example, the legal power of the priest emerges when the constituents (like a priest, the groom, the bride, vows etc.) interacts in a specific configuration that we call “a wedding”. Through downward causation, the power to legally unite the wedded couple regulates and constrains its participants (i.e., the bride and groom).

Valmisa argues that rituals are a special type of self-organizing system – a harmonizing system. While self-organization is merely descriptive of what happens, harmonization is a normative

ideal. This is because rituals nurture mutually beneficial relationships based on dominant (yet shifting) sociocultural standards and values. While some argue that shared norms and values are a necessary precondition for harmony, Valmisa argues otherwise. This is because the absence of shared norms doesn't necessarily lead to failure. For example, the initial failure of coordination in greeting rituals can quickly be assimilated and turned into effective cooperation by slightly adjusting our next move to adjust to local feedback. This shows that shared norms can be (re)created through ongoing negotiations, and shared norms are simply the result of the harmonization processes.

More importantly, active dissent need not be interpreted as a collapse of harmonization. Consider, for example, the ritual of a man opening the door for a woman, which performs an emergent oppressive power dynamics (because it does not require deliberate intention of the individual participants). When the woman refuses to follow through with the ritual (e.g., by refusing to walk through the door), both participants are forced into awareness and invited to rethink the norms and values embodied in the ritual. Over time, small acts of dissent and negotiation lead to shifts in dominant standards, giving rise to new forms of harmonization that are perceived as more desirable (e.g., a new norm that everyone holds the door). Thus, she concludes that conflict is not a sign of harmonization's failure, but the constitutive mechanism for its dynamic unfolding.

“Upright Gong and the Inescapability(?) of Moral Conflict in Classical Confucianism—A View from the *Xunzi*” - Eirik Lang Harris (Colorado State University)

Eirik Lang Harris discusses the story of the Upright Gong that is found in the *Lunyu (Analects)*, *Han Feizi*, and in the *Lushi Chunqiu*. Each version is slightly different and bring out various points. Yet, each passage shows that the moral obligation to filial piety can come into conflict with other obligations, such as one's obligation to the ruler or the state.

If one's parents do wrong and the children know it, should they disclose it to the ruler? *Lunyu* 13.8 teaches that sons should cover up for their father's crime of stealing a sheep. The *Lunyu* (in 14.18) does allow one to gently protest their parent's actions, but they should ultimately obey. In the *Han Feizi*, it is concluded that the upright subject to the ruler will be a cruel son to their father. Similarly, a filial son to his father will be a disloyal subject to the ruler.

Mengzi 7A35 discusses the case of Shun who is a ruler, but his father has committed a crime. Because Shun cannot fulfill both his duties as a filial son and as a good ruler, Shun should abdicate the throne and run away with his father.

Harris argues that both the *Lunyu* and the *Mengzi* fail to respond to the worry that arise from the conflict between filial piety and other moral values. Both the *Lunyu* and *Mengzi* seem to be absolutist about filial piety, it trumps all other values. When it comes to the *Lunyu*, it also seems to take filial piety as trumping all values. It never addresses cases where one's parents may consider something abhorrent. For *Mengzi*, it could have been argued that one's duty as a ruler requires that Shun punish the father instead of abdicating the throne. However, since *Mengzi* thinks Shun should abdicate the throne in order to maintain his filial duties, this shows that

Mengzi takes filial duties to trump all other duties. Furthermore, even if *Mengzi* abdicates the throne, he still has duties to the community at large. By absconding with his father, he puts filial duties above.

Harris turns instead to Xunzi, citing him as saying “Follow the Way, not your lord; [follow] rightness (*yi*), not your father.” He argues that on Xunzi’s view, filial piety is to follow rightness with respect to one’s parents, not just blindly following one’s parents. Xunzi notes three cases in which the filial son does not follow orders, namely when the orders endanger parents, the orders will bring shame, or the orders require a beastly act. For Xunzi, not following orders when it is permissible to do is unfilial; yet following orders when it is not permissible to do so is problematic.

Harris notes that Xunzi’s view stands in contrast to the earlier Confucian views. For Xunzi, filial piety is part of righteousness, not an independent moral value. It is not absolute in nature. Harris ends off noting that this leaves it open that righteousness (*yi*) might conflict with other values.

“Affording Wandering” - Wenqing Zhao (City University of New York Baruch College)

Zhuangzi is often seen as standing apart from Confucian values like filial piety and dutifully serving in politics. Zhuangzi instead emphasizes the values of self-preservation and freedom from the burden of social entanglement and obligations. However, historical commentators such as Fang Yizhi (1611–1671) and Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692) have interpreted the *Zhuangzi* as being in harmony with Confucian thought, an interpretive tradition that traces back to Guo Xiang’s commentary and became more pronounced among late Ming dynasty scholars.

In the presentation, Wenqing Zhao re-examines Zhuangzi’s view on the Confucian values and how Zhuangzi views Yan Hui who embodies Confucian values wholeheartedly. Zhao does this by examining *Zhuangzi* chapter 4, “In the World of Men.”

Zhuangzi depicts the feeling of conflicting values through the conversation between Confucius and Zigao. Zigao is anxious because successfully fulfilling political duty may damage one’s own health. Yet, failing will result in punishment and may also damage his health. So, Zigao does not seem to have a way out to do his job and yet maintain his health. The problem arises here because one has two hearts. Zigao is anxious because he sees the value of fulfilling his political obligations as a constraint on the value of self-preservation. Zhuangzi thinks that Zigao should forgo his commitment to his political duty when doing it, and just spontaneously serve his political duty while remaining committed to his own self-preservation.

Why can’t Zigao simply escape his political duty? Some philosophers like Tao Jiang and Karyn Lai interpret Zhuangzi as holding that such Confucian values are non-ideal constraints of life. But Zhao argues against this using two examples.

The first example is the case of Xu You who became very famous while being a hermit. The story shows that the values of self-preservation and being close to nature carve out the affordance of Xu You’s environment through how he sees his place in the world.

The second example is Yan Hui. Yan Hui is very committed, takes joy in his circumstances, is single-minded (only having one set of Confucian values) and has a very pure mind. He takes any problem as a problem of method, namely, how to better realize his value. Even when Confucius is worried for Yan Hui, Yan Hui shows no distress or concern for himself. Zhao argues that Zhuangzi displays a deep sense of love and care towards Yan Hui. Through the voice of Confucius. Zhuangzi does not mock him.

Zhao, hence, argues that Zhuangzi takes Confucian values as generic affordances rather than as constraints. Constraints function as boundaries and have negative regulatory function. The agent needs to navigate within the restrictions. In contrast, taking an affordance perspective means that the Confucian values are enabling conditions that make certain actions possible. They are positive structures that opens up possibilities for action. This framing emphasizes potential, opportunity, and enablement. So, rather than navigating around restrictions, values are seen as part of an inherent landscape of possibilities that life offers. This perspective aligns better with how skilled action often feels - not as performances within bounds, but as flowing engagement with what the situation makes available to us.