

Emotions and Tao

Young-sook Lee

1. Introduction

It seems to me that it is very important to understand emotions correctly for a good life. We can hardly call a life entangled with all sorts of emotions a good life. Human striving may be understood in terms of happiness and freedom; and I do not think we can attain them unless we are capable of coming to terms with emotional turmoil and entanglement. So, the Buddha said that all things converged on feelings and that the distinction between sages and worldlings was to be made with regard to the ability to deal with emotions.¹

Chinese philosophers have engaged in many speculations and discussions on emotions. In general, they have taken emotions negatively as something that harms an individual. But there is an exception. Some philosophers, particularly the philosophers from the Confucian tradition held that there was nothing wrong with certain kinds of emotions, namely, sages' emotions. They believed that sages' emotions were incapable of harming the sages. The Taoists, on the other hand, took a completely negative view toward emotions. They claimed that all emotions, even those of sages, were something to be contained.

Which view understands emotions most adequately? Is it the case that there is nothing wrong with the sages' emotions as the Confucian line of philosophers would claim, or that there is something wrong even with the sages' emotions as the Taoists would believe? In this paper, I will contrast the Neo-Confucian philosophers' view of emotions with the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu's. To tell the conclusion first, I do not believe that the Neo-Confucian view of emotions is adequate, and I will show why I think this is the case, by focusing on the relationship between emotions and Tao in Chuang Tzu's philosophical context.

2. The Neo-Confucian View of Emotions

Most Neo-Confucians understand emotions (*ch'ing*) in connection with nature (*hsing*). Ch'eng Yi says emotions are the external manifestations of nature:

The external manifestations of nature in the form of the emotions or desires are called *ch'ing* or feeling.... nature *per se* is not externally visible; what we see as its external manifestations are simply the feelings or emotions. ... For example, the virtue *jen* is part of the nature itself. But 'the feeling of distress, which is linked to love (*ai*), represents feeling and not nature. ...²

According to Chu Hsi, the difference between emotions and the nature is that, whereas, nature has its

root in the Heavenly Principle, emotions (or feelings) have their roots in an individual's physical frame, which is derived from the ether:

Man derives his nature from Principle and his physical frame from the Ether. This nature is the "Heavenly principle" ... Man's feelings arise from his physical frame.³

Along the same line, Shao connects emotions (or feelings) with the "self" whereas he connects nature with "things"; and explains why emotions tend to be partial and blind, whereas the nature is impartial and enlightened:

To observe things in terms of those things: this is to follow one's nature (*hsing*). But to observe things in terms of the self: this is to follow one's feelings (*ch'ing*). Nature is impartial and enlightened; the feelings are partial and blind.⁴

Again, for this very reason, emotions can easily become excessive or deficient, whereas nature is always correct. When emotions become excessive or deficient, they cause trouble; whereas to follow nature leads to spiritual enlightenment:

These feelings lead to obscuring; such obscuring leads to benightedness. But to accord oneself with other beings leads to nature; this nature leads to spirituality; such spirituality leads to enlightenment.⁵

So, Li Ao says:

That whereby a man may become a sage is his nature. That whereby a man may betray his nature are the feelings. Joy, anger, pity, fear, love, hate, and desire—these seven are all the operations of the feelings. When the feelings cause obscurement, nature is thereby drowned. ... when feelings do not operate, the nature will gain its fulfillment. ...But when the movements of the feelings continue unceasingly, it becomes impossible to return to one's nature and to radiate the infinite light of Heaven and Earth.⁶

In brief, the Neo-Confucians took a negative view of emotions in general. However, most Neo-Confucians agree that this is not the whole of the story about emotions. They admit that there are some positive emotions as well. As long as emotions are manifested within certain limits, without excess or deficiency, emotions do not cause any trouble according to the Neo-Confucians. Indeed, it is not only the Neo-Confucians but also the entire Confucian tradition that holds the view that not all emotions are negative. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, for example, it is said that emotions in due measure and degree attain "harmony":

Before feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused it is called equilibrium. When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony.⁷

Hsun Tzu, an early Confucian, also says:

Man's emotions, purposes and ideas, when proceeding according to propriety (*li*), will be orderly. If they do not proceed according to propriety, they become wrong and confused, careless and negligent.⁸

And sages are, according to Hsun Tzu, the exemplary people who always follow *li*; and, therefore, their emotions do not cause any trouble. That is to say, the Confucian and the Neo-Confucian philosophers believed that there is nothing wrong with emotions *per se*; and they give sages' emotions as a proof for it.

Ch'eng Hao speculates further along this line and offers a philosophical ground for this position: namely, the sages' emotions, according to Ch'eng Hao, are not connected with their minds but with things, i.e., external objects:

The sage expresses joy at things which properly call for joy, and anger at things which properly call for anger. Therefore the joy and anger of the sage are not connected with his mind, but with things. (Ming-tao Wen-chi: Collected Writings of Ch'eng Hao, 3.1)⁹

That is to say, whereas, in ordinary people's case, the external objects are only incidentally connected with their emotions, in sages' case, the external objects are the direct efficient cause for their emotions. Redundant sentence deleted (ed). In ordinary people's case, it is their minds that contain lots of preconceived ideas, prejudices, and so on, which contribute greatly to their emotions. It means that the ordinary people's minds do not always reflect external things as they are—beautiful object may produce an ugly reflection, and an ugly object may produce a beautiful one. So, the ordinary people's emotional expression may not be always correct—they may express joy at things which do not properly call for joy, and anger at things which do not properly call for anger.

The sages' minds are like a shining mirror. They do not have any preconceived ideas or prejudices, hence, sages' minds always reflect external things as they are—"a beautiful object produces a beautiful reflection, and an ugly object an ugly one."¹⁰ That is to say, all emotions are always correct for sages'—the sages experience joy at things that properly call for joy, and anger at things that properly call for anger, as Ch'eng Yi says:

... the mind of the sage fundamentally lacks any anger itself. It is like a shining mirror in which a beautiful object produces a beautiful reflection, and an ugly object an ugly one. But the mirror itself has no likes or dislikes. Ordinary people, being offended in their home, discharge their anger in the street. ... In the case of the sage, however, his anger operates only in accordance with (the nature of) things and never exists within himself.... The superior man is the master of things; the petty man is their slave. Now suppose a man, seeing something to be happy or angry about, allows himself to become the least bit identified with these (emotions). This is indeed to burden himself. But the mind of the sage is like still water.¹¹

Moreover, since what is responsible for sages' emotions is not their minds but the external things entirely, sages' emotions do not become a permanent part of their minds, either. For no "things" can

be permanent. As the things disappear, those emotions disappear as well. Hence, Ch'eng Hao says,

The normality of the sage is that his emotions accord with (the nature of) all things, yet (of himself) he has no emotion....¹²

The metaphysical assumption behind this claim is that the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the evil, etc. are not the intrinsic properties of the minds but of things. That is to say, it is not minds but things that possess the properties of the beautiful, the ugly, the good, the evil, etc. Without this assumption, the Neo-Confucians would not be able to justify their claim that sages are not responsible for their emotions. We must admit therefore that the two—the theory of sages' emotions and the metaphysical assumption—are intimately connected with one another. Or, alternatively, the latter serves as the ground for the former. This is how Ch'eng Hao and Ch'eng I justify the correctness of sages' emotions.

3. Problems with the Neo-Confucian views of emotions

The Neo-Confucian theory of emotions can be summarized as follows. There is nothing wrong with emotions *per se*, or, alternatively, emotions are not troublesome *per se*. On the contrary, correctly manifested emotions contribute to the state of harmony. Emotions become troublesome, however, when they are excessive or deficient; or, rather, when they do not proceed correctly.

Emotions do not proceed correctly when the mind does not have mirror-like clarity. The emotions and minds of ordinary people are not always crystal-clear but covered up with lots of biases and false expectations so that their emotions cannot proceed correctly, and thus their emotions cause trouble.

The sages' emotions and minds, in contrast, proceed always correctly because their minds are always crystal-clear. As a matter of fact, the Neo-Confucians even claim that sages do not have any emotions, as it is not the sages' minds but the external things that are entirely responsible for their emotions.

I do find some problems in this theory, however. Granted that the sages are not responsible for their emotions. We still cannot deny that it is the sages themselves and not the external objects that experience those emotions. The sages themselves are subject to all those negative emotions such as anger, sorrow, hate, etc. as well as the positive emotions such as joy, love, etc. Now, when these emotions arise, will the sages not be disturbed and distracted? Will it be possible that the sages maintain the mirror-like clarity of their minds even when these emotions arise? One may argue that even though those emotions may disturb and distract the sages, they can do so only for a short while, and never to the degree of wounding the sages, because they are not rooted in sages' minds, so, it is not a really serious problem. I would ask, however, what if those external objects that have evoked those emotions to the sages do not disappear? Suppose an evil person continually harasses and

threatens a sage. Will it not be the case, then, that those negative emotions will stay with the sage as well? Will it not be the case that the sage must continue to be disturbed, and eventually be wounded by these emotions? The best thing to do in such a case is, of course, to avoid the person or the things that cause such emotions. Unfortunately, avoidance of negative circumstances it is not always under a sages' control.

In brief, even granting that sages' minds are mirror-like and their emotions are not intrinsic to their minds, as Ch'eng I claims, I still do not believe that sages can be free from all emotional disturbances, distractions, and sufferings, as the Neo-Confucians had believed. Or, alternatively, granted that sages are not responsible for their emotions, the truth of the matter is that, as long as the emotions are experienced by them, the sages must still suffer from those emotions. And as long as they suffer, the sages must find a way to cope with the emotions. The Neo-Confucian theory of emotions does not offer any coping methodology, indeed, it cannot. For, according to this theory, it is not the sages themselves but the external things that are not under sages' control that are considered to be responsible for their troubling emotions. In other words, the Neo-Confucian theory of emotions does not promise a real sense of freedom even for sages, and this is a big problem on my view. For this reason, I do not believe that the Neo-Confucians understood emotions adequately when they claimed that there was nothing wrong with emotions *per se*.

These problems call into question the validity of the Neo-Confucian theory of emotions. First of all, I doubt the validity of the Neo-Confucian claim that the origin of sages' emotions are not in their minds but in the external objects; and secondly, I doubt the validity of their metaphysical assumption that good and bad, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, etc. are the intrinsic properties of the external things. The latter is actually the theoretical ground for the former, as I've said above. So, the inadequacy of the Neo-Confucian theory of emotions is eventually related to the inadequacy of their metaphysical assumptions. And these problems lead us to seek for a different view of emotions. I will move to Chuang Tzu's theory of emotions now.

4. Chuang Tzu's Theory of Emotions

Chuang Tzu does not believe as the Neo-Confucians do that the sages' emotions are not connected with their minds but with the external things; and he also does not believe that good and bad, right and wrong, etc. are the intrinsic properties of things. According to Chuang Tzu, all emotions, regardless of whether they are of the common unenlightened people's or of the enlightened sages', have their roots in the mind (i.e., the discriminating mind); and good and bad, right and wrong, etc. are not the intrinsic properties of things but the productions of the mind. That is to say, it is eventually the mind that is responsible for all emotions, according to Chuang Tzu. Let us see how.

Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu, "Can a man really be without feelings?" "Yes".... "When I talk about having no feelings, I mean that a man doesn't allow likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm [to suffer from emotional disturbance]. He just lets things be the way they are and doesn't try to help life

along."¹³

Chuang Tzu says here that one can be freed from the harming influences of emotions if one does not allow likes and dislikes to get into one's mind. But how can one control the likes and dislikes of the mind?

Likes and dislikes get in the mind when the distinction-making ideas such as this or that, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, etc., arise in the mind. ~~Non-contributory rhetorical questions deleted (ed)~~ According to Chuang Tzu, the ideas of good and bad, right and wrong, etc., do not come from the outside, i.e., the external objects, but from the inside, i.e., the individual mind. When an individual happens to encounter things that are rare or unearthly, he tends to consider them as good or beautiful; but he would not do so with common things.

We look on some as beautiful because they are rare or unearthly; we look on others as ugly because they are foul and rotten.¹⁴

The next thing to follow, automatically, once such a distinction is made in the mind, is the response of likes or dislikes, which in turn leads to various kinds of emotions.

The point here is that the external things do not have the properties of good or bad, right or wrong, etc. Rather, it is the individual, namely, the individual's desiring mind, in particular, that ascribe them to the external things. Or, alternatively, the properties of good and bad, right and wrong, etc. are not really real but created by the mind. Different individuals may ascribe different good and bad, right and wrong, etc. to the same object; or, the same individual may ascribe different good and bad, right and wrong, etc. to the same object at different times. It is each individual's state of mind that decides good and bad, right and wrong. When an individual fails to understand this, he is caught up in his own likes and dislikes, which in turn creates serious confusions, namely, emotional entanglement and subsequent bondage. In brief, Chuang Tzu suggests that if we want to free ourselves from emotional trouble, we must realize clearly that the properties of good and bad, right and wrong, and the like are not real. They are the mental products of mental attachments to external things.

However, this realization is still not the end of the story. The realization that good and bad, right and wrong, etc. are not real may be a necessary but not a sufficient understanding to free the individual completely from emotional suffering. According to Chuang Tzu, the complete freedom from emotions is not possible without realizing the ultimate reality, the Tao, itself. I will introduce here Chuang Tzu's distinction between "things" and what are not "things," to elucidate this point:

All that have faces, forms, voices, colors—these are all mere things. ... But things have their creation in what has no form, and their conclusion in what has no change. If a man can get hold of this and exhaust it fully, then how can things stand in his way? He may rest within the bounds that know no

excess, hide within the borders that know no source, wander where the ten thousand things have their end and beginning, unify his nature, nourish his breath, unite his virtue, and thereby communicate with that which create all things. A man like this guards what belongs to Heaven and keeps it whole. His spirit has no flaw, so how can things enter in and get at him?¹⁵

Chuang Tzu contrasts here mere "things" with "this". What does he mean by "this" which he also paraphrases with "what has no form," "what has no change," "what belongs to Heaven"? "This" refers to the Tao without doubt. Sometimes Chuang Tzu calls it the "oneness":

So it is said, you have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world. The sage never ceases to value oneness.¹⁶

Sometimes, he calls it "the source":

He takes it as fate that things should change, and he holds fast to the source.¹⁷

But all of them point to the same thing, the Tao.

If one, Chuang Tzu claims, can get hold of the Tao and exhaust it fully, then no "things" can stand in one's way. And if no "things" can stand in one's way, then naturally one would not have strong likes and dislikes, which are the result of taking "things" too seriously. And if one does not have strong likes and dislikes, then no emotions can seriously sway one. In brief, emotional entanglement and suffering are, according to Chuang Tzu, the result of being unable to prevent "things" from standing in one's way, which is in turn the result of losing hold of the Tao.

Now, according to Chuang Tzu, the Taoist sages are the people who are capable of not allowing "things," and consequently their mind-produced likes and dislikes, to block the Tao. They get hold of the Tao firmly and stay at 'the hinge of the Tao' always:

A state in which "this" and "that" no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Tao.¹⁸

In other words, by staying firmly at the hinge of the Tao, the Taoist sages free themselves from the influence of the discriminating and judging mind:

As to what is beyond the six Realms (universe), the sage admits its existence but does not theorize. As to what is within the six Realms, he theorizes but does not debate. In the case of the *Spring and Autumn*, the record of the former kings of past ages, the sage debates but does not discriminate. So [I say], those who divide fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate. The Sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So, I say, those who discriminate fail to see.¹⁹

Or, if they discriminate or judge, they are aware that their discrimination or judgment is not the final reality of things:

The Great Man ... knows that no line can be drawn between right and wrong, no border can be fixed between great and small.²⁰

When the hinge is filled into the socket, it can respond endlessly.²¹

And if a sage is aware of this, strong likes and dislikes would not follow, and consequently, the sage will not be destroyed by serious emotional entanglement. Thus Chuang Tzu says:

The man of Virtue rests without thought, moves without plan. He has no use for right and wrong, beautiful and ugly.²²

When the way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Moists....²³

To put it another way, the fixed good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, etc. are, according to Chuang Tzu, the result of the mental confusion, namely, the confusion of taking the unreal to be the real. Chuang Tzu suggests "clarity," therefore, as a cure for this confusion:

If we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.²⁴

By "using clarity," we can, Chuang Tzu says, "relegates all to the constant."²⁵ Of course "the constant" here refers to the Tao. What Chuang Tzu suggests here is that if an individual attains the utmost clarity of vision to the degree that he can relegate all to the Tao and see all things from the Tao's perspective, he will be truly free from all emotional entanglement. To achieve this level of freedom and clarity is, for Chuang Tzu, to achieve "Heavenly Equality." A Taoist sage embraces all things and harmonizes them all with Heavenly Equality. Thus he turns "right" to "not right," "so" to "not so ":

But waiting for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them. Harmonize them all with the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out your years. What do I mean by harmonizing them with the Heavenly Equality? Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget your years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home!²⁶

In other words, a Taoist sage understands that the ten thousand things are really one:

The ten thousand things are really one. We look on some as beautiful because they are rare or unearthly; we look on others as ugly because they are foul and rotten. But the foul and rotten may turn into the rare and unearthly, and the rare and unearthly may turn into the foul and rotten.²⁷

If you look at them from the point of view of their differences, then there is liver and gall.... But if you look at them from the point of view of their sameness, then the ten thousand things are all one. A man like this doesn't know what his ears or eyes should approve—he lets his mind play in the harmony of virtue. As for things, he sees them as one and does not see their loss. He regards the loss of a foot as a lump of earth thrown away.²⁸

By seeing the ten thousand things really as one, the sages are not affected by the ten thousand things; or, in Chuang Tzu's words, they do not shift with things:

He who understands what it means to possess greatness ... does not change himself for the sake of things.²⁹

He sees clearly into what has no falsehood and does not shift with things.³⁰

Instead, sages return to the Tao and rest in the Tao:

He returns himself and finds the inexhaustible; he follows antiquity and discovers the imperishable—this is the sincerity of the Great Man.³¹

Thus, to free themselves from emotions, the Taoist sages free themselves from the discriminating mind, the likes and dislikes:

The sage is still not because he takes stillness to be good and therefore is still. The ten thousand things are insufficient to distract his mind—that is the reason he is still. ... The sage's mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and Earth, the glass of the ten thousand things. Emptiness, stillness, limpidity, silence, inaction—these are the level of heaven and earth, the substance of the Way and its Virtue.³²

In an age of Perfect Virtue ... they do what is right but they do not know that this is righteousness. They love another but they do not know that this is benevolence. They are true hearted but they do not know that is loyalty. They are trustworthy but they do not know that this is good faith. They wriggle around like insects, performing services for one another, but do not know that they are being kind. Therefore they move without leaving any trail behind, act without leaving any memory of their deeds.³³

In brief, when one loses hold of the Tao, one starts to divide things up, making distinctions and discrimination; and when one divides things up, one starts to shift with things; and when one shifts with things, one is under the sway of emotions. All emotions are the result of losing hold of the Tao, according to Chuang Tzu.

5. Conclusion

I have considered in this paper two different views of emotions: that of the Neo-Confucians and that of Chuang Tzu. I've shown how the two views are different, and why I think Chuang Tzu's view of emotions is more adequate.

According to Chuang Tzu, all emotions are, whether they are of ordinary people or of sages, the result of allowing likes and dislikes to get into the mind and allowing oneself to shift with things, which in turn is the result of losing hold of the Tao. Only when one has become one with the Tao and unified one's consciousness, thus attaining a clear understanding of reality, can one truly free oneself from emotional entanglements, according to Chuang Tzu.

The Neo-Confucians did not grasp this point fully, nor did they grasp the distinction-less ultimate reality, the Tao, clearly. They considered good and bad, right and wrong, etc. as intrinsic properties of reality. The Neo-Confucian inadequate understanding of emotions is a direct consequence of their inadequate understanding of reality.

NOTES

1. Padmasin de Silva, "Theoretical perspectives on Emotions in Early Buddhism," in *Emotions in Asian Thought: a dialogue in comparative philosophy*, ed. Joel Marks and Roger T. Ames (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 110.

2. Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952-53), p. 517.

3. Ibid., p. 558.

4. Ibid., p. 467.

5. Ibid., p. 467.

6. Ibid., p. 414.

7. Tzu Suh, "The Doctrine of the Mean," in *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 98.

8. Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. I*, p. 298.

9. Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy, vol. II*, p. 524.

10. Ibid., p. 525.

11. Ibid., p. 525.

12. Ibid., p. 524.

13. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 75.

14. Ibid., p. 236.

15. Ibid., p. 198.

16. Ibid., p. 236.

17. Ibid., p. 68.

18. Ibid., p. 40.

19. Ibid., p. 44.

20. Ibid., p. 178.

21. Ibid., p. 40.
22. Ibid., p. 137.
23. Ibid., p. 40.
24. Ibid., p. 40.
25. Ibid., p. 42.
26. Ibid., p. 48.
27. Ibid., p. 236.
28. Ibid., p. 69.
29. Ibid., p. 272.
30. Ibid., p. 68.
31. Ibid., p. 272.
32. Ibid., p. 142.
33. Ibid., p. 138.