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Article:

Gibbardian Humility: Moral Fallibility and Moral Smugness[1]

Abstract

Andy Egan objects to quasi-realism that quasi-realists are committed to a form of smugness: when confronted with cases of fundamental disagreement, the quasi-realist must see him/herself as immune to moral error in a way that others are not. I urge that the concern can be tamed by considering the vice of smugness and the role it and its corresponding virtue should play in moral conversations. Here the quasi-realist need suppose no asymmetry to obtain between the level of epistemic humility he is prepared to extend to of moral disagreement and the level he expects from others. Such considerations suffice to tame Egan's concern providing we follow Allan Gibbard in understanding the quasi-realist to be committed only to a modest and not to a grandiose form of moral objectivity.

Keywords
Andy Egan, Sharon Street, Allan Gibbard, Quasi-realism, Expressivism, Mind-independence

> Those whose Way is not the same cannot take counsel together.
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> <div align="right">Confucius, Analects XV, 40</div>

1. Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Disagreement: Egan's Problem

I believe that it is wrong to open your boiled egg at the big end. You believe that it is not wrong to open your egg at the big end. We are at an impasse. The impasse might not be deep. One of us might just be wrong on some matter of prosaic nonnormative fact. But perhaps that is not the case. Even if we both came to be fully informed about all relevant facts, our disagreement might persist. Perhaps other rational means are available to resolve our disagreement. Perhaps if I became more sensitive, more imaginative, more considerate of others' needs, I would change my mind. And perhaps, by my own present lights, one's moral sensibility is improved by being changed in these ways, so that this would be, again by my own present lights, a change for the better. Perhaps your contrary view would not prove robust in circumstances where you had to endure great suffering and, by your lights, respect is only due to deliverance of one's moral sensibility that are so robust. But perhaps nothing like this is true. Perhaps there is no way our respective sensibilities might develop in ways that our respective sensibilities would themselves recognize as improvements with the upshot of resolving our disagreement. Disagreement which is in this way, deeply intractable, Andy Egan has called fundamental moral disagreement.[2] I'll follow him in this so, for now, when I talk about fundamental disagreement, this is what I mean.

Different theories might say different things about this sort of case. One view, held by what we might call the optimistic rationalist, might deny its possibility, even in principle, by maintaining that all moral disagreement can be resolved by appeal only to the facts and to norms of rationality so formal and thin that any creature deserving the name of rational might be expected to respect and observe them. Kantians, or some of them, perhaps qualify as optimistic rationalists. I shall take it here that optimistic rationalism is false.

Others might go relativistic. Perhaps there is no such thing as absolute moral truth but only truth relative to a certain sensibility. So

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[2] Egan 2007.

big-ending is wrong-subscript-me and OK-subscript–you. But that can seem to handle the intractability of our disagreement by, in effect, defining it out of existence. That big-ending is wrong-subscript-me and OK-subscript–you is something we can both recognize, so what on earth were we arguing about?

Robust realists reject this relativising move. We cannot agree but nonetheless The Truth Is Out There. At most one of us is fortunate enough to be endowed with intuitions that have successfully tracked it. But the robust realist position can seem fraught with mystery. Many robust realists these days eschew naturalism: the moral facts, they typically insist, are not constituted by the natural facts and yet they seem somehow to depend upon them. How is this dependency supposed to work? And how indeed is such intuition to be understood , this curiously ad hoc capacity for a grotesquely underdescribed species of extra-sensory perception by which such realists suppose we somehow detect these strange, one might even say, queer facts.

Seeking to navigate a distinctive path through this philosophical thicket, we find the expressivist. For expressivists our disagreement is, as Stevenson famously put it, a disagreement in attitude[3], a disagreement, we might follow Gibbard in saying, about what to do.[4] That saves the genuineness of the disagreement but avoids the metaphysical extravagance and epistemological bankruptcy that threatens to shipwreck the robust realist.

Expressivism, however, faces many objections. Andy Egan, in his 2007 paper, "Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Moral Error" raises an interesting new one. Egan's more particular target is the quasi-realist, the expressivist who seeks to preserve intact, as Egan puts it, "big and important chunks of ordinary moral discourse and practice"[5]. Some such chunks may be more important than others. The chunk that interests Egan is concerned with first-person fallibility. No one, says the chunk in question, is immune to moral error. In particular I am not immune to moral error. More particularly still, I am not immune to moral error in just the same way that you – and others – are not immune to moral error. An expressivist might conceivably be willing to dispense with this insistence and we might argue, in that case, whether he still deserved

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[3] Stevenson 1944, chapter 1.
[4] Gibbard 2003.
[5] Egan 2007, pp. 206.

the name of quasi-realist. But Egan's concerns have clear ad hominem force against the leading British exponent of the view Simon Blackburn, who endorses common sense on this point. Backburn is clear, as Egan documents, that supposing myself immune from error in ways others are not, would be "unpardonably smug"[6].

Egan cannot see how Blackburn can avoid smugness. For an expressivist to say that you are wrong is simply to express a moral sensibility, where that is something roughly along the lines of a complex emotive state, that rejects what you do or say. So far so straightforward. With similar straightforwardness, I can condemn as wrong, the actions or opinions of myself at other times, expressing a sensibility at odds with them. But how is the expressivist to understand the thought that I might, here and now, be in error, a thought that all who are otherwise than smug should surely sometimes entertain. Blackburn's account of first person fallibility is one that understands the possibility that I might be wrong in terms of the possibility that I might be led to revise my moral view as a result of an improving change in my moral sensibility (improving by my own present lights). And of course I should recognize the possibility of such improvements. By my own present lights, perhaps, a moral sensibility is improved when it becomes better informed, more coherent, more sensitive, imaginative, etc. And I am not so vain as to suppose I could not become better informed, more coherent, more sensitive etc. If I would change my big-end moral preference as a result of such an improvement, in a way, we should maybe add, that would then be robust against still further such improvements, then, by my own present lights, my preference is wrong.

But with my big-end preference, this is, ex hypothesi, not the case. Ex hypothesis, the disagreement here is fundamental. There is nothing that would count, by my own present lights, as an improvement that would change it. So, given that hypothesis, there seems nothing for the thought that I might be wrong to be. The same is also true, by your lights, of your opposing thought. But I can easily enough reject that as wrong. That is simply to express my moral sensibility that says you are, and, having such a sensibility, I can readily do that. But the thought that I am in error in a case where

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[6] Blackburn 1998, p. 318, quoted by Egan 2007, p. 210.

no improving change would issue in revision, seems unavailable. Smugness seems inescapable.

Some resistance can be summoned from the thought that though a given moral view of mine might have this property of being robust in the face of improving changes, I could never know this for sure of any particular such view, and that uncertainty would go some distance to keeping smugness, for all practical purposes, safely at bay.[7] But a worrying asymmetry remains. Egan puts it thus:

> What I've got is a guarantee that none of my moral beliefs are fundamentally mistaken – that is, stable but incorrect. That is, I've got a guarantee that I'm not isolated from the moral truth is such a way that I can't ever come to believe it by any process of revision that I'd endorse.[8]

I appear to have such a guarantee of non-isolation and you do not and that may well look like a case of just the smugness Egan wants to avoid.

Blackburn has objected in response[9] that Egan's argument equivocates between two thoughts, (1) the thought that something in my moral outlook can be regarded as true if no improvement would undermine it, and (2) the thought that something can be regarded as true if nothing I would recognize as an improvement would undermine it. (1) is Blackburn's favoured understanding of moral truth and it commits him to no asymmetries. Egan thinks it does only because he confuses it with 2. But perhaps this complaint doesn't seem quite adequate to tame the concern. The quasi–realist should perhaps still be worried about the sort of case Egan focuses on, where you and I are in fundamental moral disagreement, such that I reject what you say and so does anyone with a sensibility I admire or could be brought to admire were I only, by my own lights, a bit more admirable; the worry being that there is, in a case such as that, just nothing for the thought to be that, in a case such as that, you might be right while I am wrong. It fails to represent an intelligible genuine possibility. And perhaps that leaves the quasi realist looking unpardonably smug in a way that Blackburn's finessing does not much help with.

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[7] Heather Arnold has emphasized in conversation the significance of this point..
[8] Egan 2007, p. 214.
[9] Blackburn 2009.

2 . Quasi-Realism and Mind-Independence: Street's Problem

Let me also draw attention to another recent critic of quasi-realism, Sharon Street in her paper "Mind Independence Without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways". Street raises an objection to quasi-realism that has a clear affinity with Egan's[10]. Quasi-realists, Street observes, seek to vindicate their right to say the things realists say. In particular they seek to vindicate their right to speak of mind independent normative truths. Both Blackburn and Gibbard have urged that the quasi-realist can do this.[11] Killing children for fun is wrong whether or not I think so. In saying that, I simply express, on this quasi-realist view, a disapproving attitude of mine to killing children for fun that applies not just in the present circumstances where I hold that attitude but to others where I do not. There are possible worlds where I do not disapprove of killing children for fun but I, located at the actual world, disapprove of killing children for fun even in those worlds. According to my moral sensibility, the wrongness of killing children for fun doesn't depend on the facts about my moral sensibility. And in that way we accommodate the idea that moral value is mind independent.

But now Street sees a danger in the quasi-realist project. To the extent that quasi-realists do earn themselves this right, they risk opening themselves up to objections that also face realists. For if one earns the right to say what realists want to say, one may find oneself contaminated with the same commitments suspicion of which might credibly have motivated rejecting realism in the first place. And, Street contends, quasi-realists who maintain that they can make good sense of the idea of mind independent normative truths render themselves vulnerable to her own favourite objection to realism, that is, to an argument from a Darwinian dilemma.[12]

Roughly it goes as follows. Our normative sensibilities, the tendencies we have towards particular normative judgements, have been massively influenced by evolutionary forces. So we may ask: is this process of evolutionary influence one that has some tendency to track the mind-independent normative truth or is it not? The first horn, that this process does track these truths, Street rejects on the

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[10] Street 2011. Street herself notes the affinity on p. 23, note 43.
[11] Blackburn 1984, chapter 6, Gibbard 2003, chapter 9.
[12] First stated in Street 2006.

grounds that it is, as she puts it, "scientifically indefensible".[13] The second horn, that these evolutionary forces do not shape our normative sensibilities in ways that respond to any such mind-independent truth, leads to a hopeless scepticism where we have no reason at all to imagine that our sensibilities are in any way a reflection of these independent truths, whatever they are – and indeed, on this horn of the dilemma, they might, Street urges, be anything. And this dilemma, she urges, is applicable to any view which takes the normative truth to be mind-independent, including quasi-realism.

Street's paper was published alongside a response by Allan Gibbard that I find instructive.[14] Quasi-realism is a fundamentally non-realist view but one that seeks to mimic realism in ways that will keep various unpalatable forms of normative scepticism at bay. But what sort of realism, Gibbard asks, is the quasi-realist to mimic? He distinguishes here between what he calls vast and tempered realism: "Whereas vast normative realism treats our judgments as indicators of facts separate from us, laying us open to the question of whether our judgments are truly indications at all of normative facts independent of us, any more than the judgments of exotic peoples are, this tempered realism does no such thing. It cultivates standards for when normative judgments are to be trusted, but doesn't follow through on treating our judgments fully as indicators of independent facts."[15] It is tempered, not vast realism, he argues, while claiming the dialectical advantage over the tempered realist of being better placed to explain the tempering. Because the quasi-realist mimics only the tempered realist, he needs to secure a certain degree of mind-independence but not enough for Street's dilemma to bite. Here Gibbard is in large measure echoing thoughts he had aired much earlier in his 1990 book Wise Choices, Apt-Feelings in defending the view he there called norm-expressivism. He had not yet at that time explicitly adopted from Blackburn the quasi-realist take on his philosophical enterprise he has now embraced; but he did, in the brilliant and too-little discussed Part III of that book, endeavour illuminatingly to show how norm expressivism could be reconciled with modest forms of objectivity, even if not with what

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[13] Street 2011, p. 13.
[14] Gibbard 2011.
[15]Ibid., p. 44

he calls grandiose objectivity.[16] While Gibbard's view has evolved significantly between 1990 and his 2011 response to Street, there is enough deep continuity there for it to make good sense to understand grandiose objectivity as what we would need to secure if we sought to mimic vast, and not merely tempered realism. Both here and in the reply to Street, we can read Gibbard as urging that modest objectivity is all we need for normative thought and discourse to serve its core purpose of securing the coordinating benefits of normative discussion.

3. How to be a Quasi-Realist Without Being Smug

I have now set the stage for a little virtue ethics. For, in thinking about Egan's concerns, it will surely be instructive to do a bit of thinking about the interesting vice of smugness. The first thing to do, I think, is to acknowledge that it is indeed a vice. And we should be clear what sort of vice it is and in what sort of contexts it is an appropriate thing for us to identify and object to. I think, first of all, it is a vice that has an opposite vice. A vice, that is, whose corresponding virtue has the familiar Aristotelian feature of lying on a mean between two undesirable extremes.[17] The opposite vice to smugness, I take it, would be a kind of moral pusillanimity, a catastrophic lack of confidence in one's own moral convictions and commitments. The virtuous mean is a proper but not excessive moral humility, or to say much the same thing but with a different emphasis, a healthy, but cautious confidence.[18]

This virtue and these vices have as their primary sphere of application, that part of human experience that is concerned with normative conflict and disagreement and the kind of normative conversation and mutual engagement that seeks to address such conflict and disagreement. It is immensely important that we should have such conversations for we desire to live together at peace in

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[16] Gibbard 1990, pp. 199-201.

[17] Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2.

[18] Again Gibbard is there ahead of me. "A person who is wholly unpersuadable would get few benefits from normative discussion...He would be a poor candidate for cooperative social life; he would risk ostracism. It would also be costly, though, to be a pushover in discussion. To evince compliance to any demands whatsoever, so long as they were made in the name of putative norms, would open a person to manipulation. What might be advantageous then, is some tendency to gravitate towards the norms of those around one, together with some firmness in sticking to the norms one has hitherto accepted. " 1990, pp. 77-78.

some semblance of moral community and some rational means of managing, containing and where possible resolving disagreement is vital if we are to do this.

It is a question here of virtues and vices applicable to conversation between human beings who disagree with each other. Coming to such conversations we bring with us our moral opinions and convictions. The quasi-realist has an expressivist take on what these are. My own version of this take is, at first approximation, this. When I say, Torture is wrong, I express my unwillingness to accept as the governing code for my moral community any code that permits torture. An unwillingness is not a belief, hence the expressivism. And when you disagree you are best understood as expressing a state of mind of a similar kind. Now if you are in the grip of old fashioned parodies of old fashioned emotivism, you will think there is nothing gong on here except an exercise in mutual emotional sounding off that leave the conversation with nowhere, in the way of mutual rational engagement to go. But this picture is seldom if ever true: in particular, where disagreement is not fundamental, it will tend not to be. Even where we disagree in ways that are profound and disturbing, such disagreement almost always takes place against a massive background of agreement. Where there is a context of shared norms and shared standards of what count as compelling considerations in moral argumentation, there is a possibility of reasoned argument and constructive moral conversation among parties that disagree.

Because we often do disagree and because we have to live together in rather a limited space, it matters that we have such conversations. We need, as Gibbard emphasizes, to work out in community what to do, think and feel[19], to put our heads together.[20] And we can moralize about what norms should govern these activities, or what virtues ideally equip us for them. As I have noted, a core such virtue plausibly lies on a mean between a dogmatic smugness and a craven lack of confidence. Dogmatic smugness is obviously a vice. But lack of confidence is no less clearly another. I think the actions of sadistic bullies are wicked. I think it is wrong to torture people. I don't think rape is a good way of obtaining sexual gratification. And you know what, I am really pretty smug about these convictions. And I doubt if you think that especially

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[19] 1990, p. 72.
[20] 2011, p. 48.

epistemically delinquent on my part. I don't often catch myself thinking, I think wanton cruelty is wrong but maybe I'm wrong about that. And I don't think I am much at fault not thinking this. On the other hand, I shouldn't make things too easy for myself by exploiting too readily the emotional buttons I know examples like this must press. I know too, after all, that history is full of people who held, with equally unshakeably confidence, moral beliefs that I no less confidently reject.

If you and I are to live together in a single moral community and if we do not agree on certain questions about what moral standards should govern our community, we need to talk. And if we are virtuous we will strike the right balance between too much smugness and too much humility. Now here's a claim about the ethics of such conversations that seems to me very plausible and that I think quite crucial to defusing Egan's central concern. We should expect a large measure of reciprocity. I shouldn't demand of you that you bring to the conversation a level of humility, an openness to influence and readiness to change of mind, greater than I am prepared to bring myself. Nor should you, in turn, make a comparable demand of me. So there is no concern, here at the level of the norms that govern the conduct of moral disagreement, with any first person asymmetry. And so long as I do not demand of you a level of humility, an openness to influence and readiness to change of mind, greater than I am prepared to bring myself, I think I am exonerated, in a way consistent with quasi-realism, of any charge of smugness.

4. Modest Objectivity and Moral Conversation

Here is an optimistic but I hope not foolish conjecture. Disagreements between human beings, and particularly disagreements between human beings historically close enough to engage each other as conversational partners, are seldom, in Egan's sense, fundamental. However we can readily at least conceive of circumstances where moral conversation has no prospect of resolving moral disagreement. We can conceive of circumstances where your moral sensibility is so profoundly unlike my own that nothing I could say to you, or you to me, could ever gain rational purchase. In Williams' terminology we might say you have no internal reason to agree with me or I with you – no sound

deliberative route can take us from where we are to a place where we agree.[21] If this were the case, it might not necessarily make our conversation wholly pointless. We might conduct it in a public forum where we each hoped to influence by our words, not the other, but those listening in our audience. But certainly a private conversation, where there is nothing for us to do except engage in futile mutual browbeating is likely to be largely pointless.

It is one thing for our conversation to be pointless in this way. It is another for us to know this. In practice it can be very difficult to tell in advance how intractable a particular disagreement is going to be. To acknowledge the pointlessness of moral conversation is to recognize a moment of political crisis, to recognize that the possibility of our living together in moral community is imperilled. Reasonably reluctant to do that, we may give the possibility of moral conversation the benefit of the doubt and carry on talking. Otherwise why ever would we bother? The fact that I bother talking to you at all thus plausibly carries, at least ordinarily, an implicature that I don't think this is a waste of time, and consequently that I don't think our disagreement, in this way, fundamental.[22]

By talking to each other at all, we normally presuppose that our disagreement is not fundamental. And with other human beings we encounter and talk to this optimistic presupposition is perhaps ordinarily right.[23] But it might of course conceivably go wrong. Fundamental disagreement is certainly possible. Consider the characters I will call The Others, with an upper case 'O' to emphasize just how terribly other they are. The Others live on a distant planet in a remote galaxy and, while they are recognizably rational creatures, while indeed they are really rather clever, their moral beliefs are, by our lights, immensely alien and strange and perhaps rather horrible.

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[21] Williams 1981.

[22] Cf. Finlay 2008, pp. 257-258, Lenman, forthcoming.

[23] This may be questioned by pointing to the abundant documentation for very deep and extensive moral disagreement. See e.g. Doris and Plakias 2008, Olson 2011, esp. p. 72. But the significance of this can be overrated. Deep and extensive is not at all the same as fundamental. Three pints are worth stressing. (1) It is important to notice how even deep disagreement ordinarily has, as noted above, a massive background of agreement. Because the former is a problem it is often far more salient to us than the latter but we should not ignore the latter. (2) Fundamental disagreement is disagreement that is is not resolved when parties are fully rational and fully informed. As all human parties to actual disagreement tend to be very far from fully informed and very imperfectly rational, we should properly be extremely cautious in diagnosing that disagreement is fundamental (much more so, I would suggest, that Doris and Plakias). (3) Fundamental disagreement is not the same as disagreement about fundamentals and cases of the latter need not be cases of the former. (See the discussion of Olson in Lenman, forthcoming.)

Would there be any point in having a conversation with The Others in the fabulously unlikely event that I should ever encounter them? Perhaps with a view to arriving at some kind of ethnographic understanding of these strange and interesting creatures. But not with a view of making a normative community with them. Our pervasive and fundamental disagreement, we may suppose, renders that project a futile one. So the norms that govern moral conversation and the appropriate virtues of balancing confidence and humility, avoiding both a craven deference and an unpardonable smugness, hardly apply. But do I nonetheless want smugly to affirm that they are wrong and I am right?

Not really, no. I don't really see the point in saying anything of the sort. The point of moral thought and conversation is to negotiate conflict and arrive at moral understandings that I and those with whom I seek to live in moral community can stably reflectively endorse. That's a local problem to which the distant and alien Others have no relevance. In a case like this, something like what Williams called the relativism of distance is surely the most appropriate response.[24] Are The Others wrong? Not really, they are just very different. Perhaps we might find it rather horrible that they behave the way they do just as it is horrible that people get cancer and there are sometimes terrible earthquakes, but, as in the latter cases, the thought here is not really a moral thought and the concern is not really moral concern. There is nothing helpful by way of moralizing to be said about them and certainly nothing of the sort to be said to them. As Gibbard observes in chapter 10 of Wise Choices, Apt Feelings, "What matters chiefly is not what we can say to strange beings who are merely conceivable but what we can say to each other."[25]

This should come as no surprise. Quasi-realism is not realism. The truth is not out there. Nothing moral is out there; just a few squillion atoms doing their stuff. The truth, as Hume emphasized, is in here.[26] Pace Nagel[27], it's ultimately just us. The moral outlook we possess and express in our moral judgements has a generous measure of built in moral mind-independence. So, according to the outlook most of us share, the wrongness of killing wouldn't change

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[24] Williams 1985, chapter 9.

[25] Gibbard 1990, p. 201. Compare his remarks in his 2011, p. 48 on the futility of "putting our heads together with those with whom we stand in fundamental disagreement.

[26] Hume 2000, pp. 301-302 (3.1.1).

[27] Nagel 1997.

if I stopped disapproving if it. But of course it's just our outlook. The moral truths it expresses did not shape its evolution. It is Man who has shaped the Way, the Way did not shape Man.[28] Street may or may not be right that this should embarrass the realist. It certainly need not embarrass the expressivist unless the expressivist insists on a level of mind-independence far greater than he will ever, for any practical purpose, require, unless, in other words, he aspires to grandiose objectivity.

"What matters chiefly is not what we can say to strange beings who are merely conceivable but what we can say to each other." That thought is at the heart of what the expressivist should say in response to Egan. Smugness is a vice the invocation of which is most clearly relevant in the context of the moral reflection and conversation we have with each other. And, as with other vices, there is a story to be told about why it is a vice, a story grounded in our ideas about what such moral reflection and conversation is for and the attitudes and expectations that are appropriate to our partners in it. This story, a story the expressivist is abundantly equipped to tell, is a fragment of moral epistemology but telling it is just a piece of moralizing, first order philosophical ethics as Mackie would have it. Telling it gives us pretty well all we need to make sense of when and why smugness is a vice and why there are no first-person asymmetries in the normative requirement to avoid it.

I don't think we need worry about being isolated from the moral truth in the way Egan imagines. Moral truth, as expressivists understand it, just isn't robustly objective enough for that to be a genuine and intelligible possibility. What should worry us is the possibility of being isolated from each other, of finding our moral community broken by division of opinion on matters that are intractable and irresolvable, where the only sort of moral community you are prepared to find acceptable would be entirely intolerable to me. That would a political tragedy for which the supposed metaphysical reassurances of more realistic takes on metaethics would offer little real relief

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[28] This sentence is suggested by, though it may not quite translate, words attributed to Confucius at Analects 15.29.

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