

Abstract

Roughly, *moral deference* is the practice of forming a moral belief on the basis of some credible authority's recommendation rather than on one's own moral judgment. Many philosophers have suggested that the sort of knowledge yielded by moral deference is deficient in various ways. To better appreciate its possible deficiencies, I propose that we look at a centuries-long philosophical discourse that made much of the shortcomings of this sort of knowledge, which is the discourse about “getting it oneself” (*zide* 自得) in the later (post-classical) Confucian tradition. In this chapter, I offer the first sustained philosophical account of “getting it oneself,” as conceived by its most influential proponents—Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi. I describe its most notable features, including its tendency to enhance epistemic confidence and what I call “self-discovery aspects” of the phenomenon. I then focus on the Neo-Confucian claim that some parts of the deliberative process should be spontaneous or unforced, which, I argue, they saw as necessary for an unbiased appreciation of the inferential force of the reasons for one's moral conclusions. I conclude by pointing to some of the broader implications of my reading for both the history of philosophy and current debates about moral deference.

Keywords

moral deference; moral testimony; understanding; *zide*; Neo-Confucianism; Cheng Hao; Cheng Yi; Zhu Xi

“Getting It Oneself” (*Zide* 自得) as an Alternative to Testimonial Knowledge and Deference to Tradition

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1. Introduction

Generally speaking, this chapter is about the moral epistemology of three giants of post-classical Chinese philosophy. The three giants are Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and the Cheng brothers, the latter being Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and his younger but longer-lived brother Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107). The Cheng brothers were by most accounts the founding figures in a revolution in Chinese philosophy that anglophones now call Neo-Confucianism (the brothers called their movement *Daoxue* 道學, “The Study of the Way”). To simplify somewhat, the iterations of Confucianism before their time (the Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius, among others) had well-developed views on issues in ethics, political thought, and moral psychology, but hadn’t yet developed much metaphysics, epistemology, systematicity, or technical terminology. The Cheng brothers gave Confucianism a metaphysics, an epistemology, a systematic philosophical framework, and numerous philosophical terms of art, and this helped Confucianism to compete more favorably with Chinese Buddhists, who had metaphysics, systematicity, and technical terminology in abundance. The last of these philosophers, Zhu Xi, saw himself as continuing the legacy of the Cheng brothers, but eclipsed them in importance and influence. He is now known

as the great synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism, the one whose views became orthodoxy for at least six centuries and whose interpretation of the Confucian tradition is arguably still regarded as orthodoxy by many Confucians today, not just in China but in much of East Asia. His interpretations of the classical Confucian texts became the basis for the civil service exam in 1313–15, a position they held almost without interruption until 1905. Because of his widely accepted authority and the need to master his thought in order to get China’s most coveted jobs, nearly every adult male who aspired to government service memorized his commentaries and interpretations, and even those who did not so aspire had to be conversant with a philosophical worldview that was thoroughly suffused with his ideas. Few philosophers have had so much direct influence on so many.

My specific focus is Zhu and the Cheng brothers’ account of a technical term translated as “getting it oneself.” The term in Chinese is *zide* 自得. By most accounts, the most salient feature of “getting it oneself” is that the epistemic agent knows something of direct ethical significance on her own authority, and not (for example) on the authority of an expert or a well-tested and proven ethical tradition. Roughly, in cases of *zide*, what warrants the knowledge claim (the claim that one “knows it”) is that it is the proper result of one’s own reliable faculties and processes of good judgment. This is to be contrasted with other familiar ways of arriving at a correct ethical view, which is to rely on the credible testimony of an expert or on the credibility of a tradition that has been tested and proven over generations. Philosophical accounts of getting it oneself thus have implications for broader philosophical issues of autonomy, moral expertise, and testimonial knowledge in ethics.

For the thinkers under discussion, “getting it oneself” was a second-tier term of art. It wasn’t the focus of so much controversy as to warrant entire treatises, but just about everyone who was

interested in Confucianism after the Cheng brothers was interested in the term and the phenomenon to which it referred. You find the most elucidation of it in commentaries on some Confucian classics and in dialogues with students (the students of Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers recorded and circulated summaries of those dialogues), and it is clear that the philosophers and students were concerned with developing a consistent and coherent account of both *zide* itself and its roles and functions in ethics and epistemology more generally. Cheng Yi famously claimed that nothing in ethical learning was more important than getting it oneself.¹ Although Zhu sometimes disagreed with the Cheng brothers on some issues, he took himself to be right on the same page as them with respect to *zide* and its moral and epistemic functions, usually presenting his own views as clarifications of or elaborations upon those of the Chengs.² (Although there may have been a difference of emphasis between Zhu and the Chengs, as I will explain in section 3.4.) Given its importance, you would think that there would be at least much sustained discussion of it in secondary literature on Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism. In fact,

¹ *Henan Chengshi yishu* (“*The Surviving Works of the Chengs of Henan*”) 25.7. In this chapter, all citations of the *Henan Chengshi yishu* will refer to the version found in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#), and will cite text by *juan* (“fascicle”) number and passage or paragraph numbers. For example, the text cited above is identified as “25.7,” indicating that it appears in the 7th passage in *juan* 25. The demarcation of passages is relatively consistent across editions, so readers of Chinese should be able to find the intended text in various sources.

² *Mengzi jizhu* 4B14. *Mengzi jizhu* (“*Collected Commentaries on the Mencius*”) is Zhu Xi’s highly influential commentary on the *Mencius* or *Mengzi*, one of the canonical Confucian classics. All citations of Zhu’s commentaries refer to [Zhu 1987](#) and identify the relevant passages in the primary text by the primary text’s traditional citation conventions.

only one scholar, the late historian and sinologist Wm. Theodore de Bary (1919–2017), has written more than passing comments about it. He devoted a chapter to it in his *Learning for One's Self* (1991) and offered some sustained discussion of it in his *The Liberal Tradition in China* (1983). Given his disciplinary priorities, his analysis is understandably somewhat loose about the precise philosophical features and implications. The dearth of scholarship may be due to the fact that very few of the relevant texts have been translated into modern languages, and even for regular readers of Song dynasty literary Chinese the passages can be difficult to decipher.

With this in mind, I would like to make a first attempt at offering a more careful, philosophical analysis of “getting it oneself” as characterized by the three giants of post-classical Chinese philosophy. Since there is so little other work on this topic, it might be safe to say that this chapter is, in the first instance, an excuse to translate some of the more interesting comments and offer a defensible account of the primary features of getting it oneself. But I do want to advance what I take to be some subtler (and probably more controversial) theses. The first of these will have to do with the norms of “individualism” underlying some of their remarks about getting it oneself. One of the most notable features of *zide* as Zhu and the Chengs describe it, is that it seems to require that some of the deliberative work be unforced or come easily and naturally. It is tempting to read this feature as arising from an independent ethical commitment to independence of thought or free and uncoerced expression, and that seems to be the strong suggestion of the aforementioned historian, who took *zide* to reflect an independent commitment to what he called “individualism” and a “liberal tradition” in Neo-Confucianism (de Bary 1991: 68–97). Against this view, I will argue that what seems to have motivated them (and helped to justify their account of *zide*) was in fact a cognitive requirement of the mode of knowledge-

acquisition that Zhu and the Cheng brothers had in mind. If there was an independent commitment to individualism and liberal education, this could help to explain the naturalness or ease of getting it oneself. But if so, it was overdetermined, as the conditions necessary for the particular sort of knowledge acquisition that Zhu and the Chengs were concerned with are quite enough to explain why they were adamant that “getting it oneself” come naturally and easily. And this brings me to my second notable thesis, which is that some of the most important features of getting it oneself are meant to point to an epistemic requirement that I will call the *unbiased appreciation of the inferential force of one’s reasons*. I will say more about what this means later, but to give a rough idea, it’s the attitude and capacity we exhibit when we can detect how certain conclusions follow from certain reasons, and thus feel inclined to draw the relevant conclusions. I read them as holding that this is an indispensable requirement of *zide* that cannot be explained away. My claim is somewhat controversial because Zhu and the Chengs do not explicitly talk about “appreciation of the inferential force of reasons” in the passages in question. I think that’s just because they struggled to find the language to describe this thing (just as we do), and found it easier to talk about the necessary conditions for such appreciation than to characterize the appreciation itself.

Zhu and the Cheng brothers also make subtle and astute observations about other notions and phenomena related to this ability to appreciate inferential force. For example, they proposed a new metric that is useful in explaining how someone might succeed or fail to achieve unbiased appreciation of inferential force, which I will call *auto-epistemic proximity*. I also read them as claiming that one cannot adequately characterize a particular instance of inferential force in words, so that there is necessarily a component of getting it for oneself that we cannot account

for linguistically, except to define it ostensibly by pointing to personal experiences of appreciating them.

My plan of action is as follows. In the next section (section 2), I will provide just enough historical background to help readers situate discussions of *zide* in the broader discourse of the time, and better understand what motivated them to pin so much of their account of moral virtue and moral knowledge on it. In section 3, I will give what I am calling a “general account” of getting it oneself, highlighting what I take to be some of the more obvious features and providing some informed speculation as to their ethical or epistemological significance. In section 4, I will provide textual evidence for my several observations about the need for unbiased appreciation of inferential force. Finally, in section 5, I draw out some of the broader implications of this study, not just for scholarship on East Asian philosophy but also for current debates about moral deference and testimonial moral knowledge.

2. Some Historical Background: Moral Deference and the Confucian Tradition

On an influential and plausible reading of the Confucian philosophical discourse, one of the issues at the center of its moral epistemology and theories of virtue—arguably the beating heart of much Confucian and Neo-Confucian debate—had to do with moral deference. That is, it had to do with the practice of deferring to the authoritative tradition and its reliable interpreters in determining which ethical views to adopt and enact. This is because Confucianism broadly construed was pulled in two directions. On the one hand, what supposedly united all Confucians was a belief in the great ethical tradition—a tradition whose salient parts included rituals,

canonical texts, and views about the importance of family and virtue, and one that came down to them from supposed golden ages in the distant past, where the tradition had demonstrated its credibility by bringing peace, just rulership, and strong community bonds, among other goods. This would seem to suggest that it's constitutive of being a Confucian that one defers to the time-tested tradition, even if that means adopting views against one's own better judgment. On the other hand, Confucians were also drawn to the idea that there was something fundamentally problematic about adopting an ethical view without understanding its right-making features for oneself.³ Virtuous people generally understand why the ethical practices that they adopt are good ones, and ethical sensibilities are best acquired by coming to see for oneself what makes one's practices the correct ones (and other practices the wrong ones).⁴

The most forceful defense of pervasive moral deference came from a classical Confucian philosopher named Xunzi 荀子 (third century BCE). In separate papers, I have reconstructed some of Xunzi's main arguments for pervasive moral deference and some Neo-Confucian responses to it (Tiwald 2012 and Tiwald ms). For purposes of understanding the Neo-Confucians' interest in *zide*, it helps to know some of their principal objections to pervasive moral deference as I understand them. The first argument is largely implicit. As I read them, many Confucians share an intuition with many philosophers today that acting on views acquired through moral deference lacks full moral worth (Hills 2009). The underlying thought, I suspect,

³ A study by James Andow (2020) suggests that this discomfort with moral testimony and moral deference is widely shared today, at least among the demographic groups that he tested.

⁴ For an influential study of Confucianism that illuminates the tensions between ethical self-reliance and ethical deference among various philosophers, see Ivanhoe 2000.

is that in order to for an act to count as morally worthy for a person, that person must at least bear some responsibility or credit for doing the morally worthy thing, and in order to get credit for doing the morally worthy thing, she must have knowingly done it under some thick description that discloses what's morally worthy about it. So, for example, it would be odd to give credit to Meihua for doing something compassionate or loyal if she isn't aware of or responding to the features of her situation that make her behavior compassionate or loyal, as when she's just following someone else's instructions (just as Meihua wouldn't get credit for winning a card game if she just put cards down at random without knowing what made them winning hands). Second, and more explicitly, knowledge acquired through moral deference fails to give rise to a feature of complete virtue that I call wholeheartedness, which is my expedient translation (for some purposes) of the Chinese term *cheng* 誠 (also translated as integrity or sincerity).⁵ Wholeheartedness is the quality of having well-integrated feelings, desires, beliefs, and commitments, such that the agent experiences no significant internal opposition or resistance to virtuous behavior. For example, someone who can quit a deeply corrupt employer without regret is more wholeheartedly righteous than someone who stalls or looks for excuses to stay on, and someone who wants to visit a sick friend in the hospital is more wholeheartedly benevolent or compassionate than someone who is committed to visiting the friend but does so grudgingly. The Neo-Confucians propose (plausibly) that when one acquires ethical knowledge by deference rather than by getting it oneself, the resultant ethical views and commitments won't be well

⁵ Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Henan Chengshi yishu* 1.5, 11.116 (in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#)). Zhu Xi, *Daxue zhangju* (*Commentary on the Greater Learning*), commentary section 6. All citations of Zhu's commentaries refer to [Zhu 1987](#) and identify the relevant passages in the primary text by the primary text's traditional citation conventions.

integrated into one's other ethical convictions, desires, feelings, etc. Finally, the Neo-Confucians seem to believe that if pervasive moral deference were really the correct practice, then following the correct practice would make it impossible to cultivate the virtues. There must be at least some domains of life in which we can trust our own capacities of autonomous ethical knowledge, or else there would be no root or foundation from which autonomous ethical knowledge of any kind could grow.⁶

It is easy to overstate the differences between the parties in this debate. Both Xunzi (the great defender of deference to the Confucian tradition) and his Neo-Confucian critics believed that, all other things being equal, it is more virtuous for people to understand what makes their practices the right ones. Accordingly, all sides would agree that when one can be confident about one's own ethical judgments, it is better to endorse and act on ethical views that one believes to be correct by one's own lights. Sages rightly rely on their own deliberative processes to assess ethical affairs (Tiwald 2012: 286–7).

Nevertheless, these concessions still leave a great number of questions of deference and autonomy open. For example, they don't tell us whether ethical novices—people who don't have reason to trust their own ethical judgments—should adopt and act on ethical views that they endorse on their own authority. For Xunzi, the answer is clear: the ethical views that the novice adopts (that is, the novice's ethical beliefs) should be those recommended by the Confucian tradition and its authoritative interpreters, and the views that the novice acts on (the novice's ethical behavior) should also be those that come from the tradition. For Neo-Confucians like the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi, the expectations of novices are more complicated. First, while they

⁶ See Tiwald ms and Dai Zhen 2009: sections 21 and 26.

acknowledge that there are many domains of life in which we are better off deferring to experts and tradition, they also believe that, if virtue is to be possible for novices, the novices must assume that there are some domains of life in which their naïve or inexpert judgments are reliable. Oft-mentioned evidence of reliable ethical knowledge in novices are children’s tendency to love and obey their parents, the natural human inclination to save a child from falling into a well, and the natural human aversion to certain shameless displays of self-debasement such as accepting food given with open contempt (I will have much more to say about this last example in section 4). Second, it is arguable that Zhu and the Cheng brothers also thought that *sometimes* it is better to let people follow their own ethical compasses, however flawed, than to adopt and follow a traditional practice that they do not entirely understand. This second claim is somewhat more controversial. At least one interpreter of Neo-Confucianism has proposed that sages alone can act on their own ethical judgment and that everyone else must follow good instructions (Munro 1988: 155–91). But I find places where Zhu and the Chengs think the instructional value of “getting it oneself” is sufficiently high and the costs of defying the tradition are sufficiently low to allow people some discretion. For example, there is a famous case in the *Analects*, traditionally attributed to Confucius (Kongzi), in which a student declares that he doesn’t see the point in the traditional practice of mourning the death of a parent for three years—given all of the opportunity costs, he suggests, one year should be enough. After determining that the student really would be comfortable with the abbreviated mourning ritual, Confucius countenances the practice for that student, but laments that the student is so callous and ungrateful.⁷ In Zhu Xi’s commentary, he suggests that it was more important to get the student to seek in himself the

⁷ *Analects* 17.21 (see Slingerland 2003).

considerations that should have made him uncomfortable with the shorter mourning period, so that he could “get them himself.”⁸ I read this as suggesting that the pedagogical and long-run ethical advantages of “getting it oneself” sometimes provide pro tanto reasons to give novices some leeway to do wrong, provided that the wrong isn’t too severe or the harm too great.⁹ Presumably Zhu would allow that there are other situations in which the advantages of getting it oneself can justify allowing novices some leeway to make mistakes.

One more bit of historical context. In most (but not all) cases, Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers are able to find some classical source for their major philosophical claims, some passage in their canon that helps to prove that ancient Confucian sages affirm the position that they propound. Ultimately, they think, we won’t need to rely on the ancient sources to believe in the veracity of their teachings (we’ll know it for ourselves, of course). Still, they often weave some of the language of classical sources into their remarks, or artfully allude to phrases or ideas that come from those sources. With this in mind, it will be useful to have in view what I take to be the *locus classicus* of Confucian accounts of *zide*, which is from the *Mencius* or *Mengzi* 孟子, a text traditionally attributed to a Confucian philosopher of the same name. In that passage, Mencius himself offers a stirring account of the advantages of grasping the Confucian Way by *zide*, suggesting that the knowledge so acquired imparts numerous advantages to the knower:

⁸ *Lunyu jizhu* (“*Collected Commentaries on the Analects*”) 17.21. All citations of Zhu’s commentaries refer to Zhu 1987 and identify the relevant passages in the primary text by the primary text’s traditional citation conventions.

⁹ I also suspect that, for both Confucius and for Zhu Xi, insincere mourning is of little value when the mourning child has so little love and gratitude for the parents in the first place. For children who are more loving and grateful it would be a mistake to skimp on the ritual grieving process.

孟子曰：「君子深造之以道，欲其自得之也。自得之，則居之安；居之安，則資之深；資之深，則取之左右逢其原，故君子欲其自得之也。」

Mencius said, “The superior person steep himself in it deeply, following the Way, desiring to get it himself. Getting it himself, he dwells in it securely. Dwelling in it securely, he deeply relies on it. Deeply relying on it, he draws upon it left and right, encountering its source. Hence, the superior person desires to get it himself.”¹⁰

As we will see, later Confucians came to understand the phrase translated as “steep in it deeply” (*shenzao* 深造) to refer to an intermediate stage where one is still immersed in and gathering thoughts about a matter (a sense that still occasionally appears in modern Chinese). And many later Confucians make artful reference to the sense of “security” (*an* 安) afforded by getting it oneself.

3. A General Account of Getting It Oneself

3.1 Knowing It on One’s Own Authority

In this section, I will discuss what I take to be some of the most important distinguishing features of *zide*, and engage in some textually-informed conjecture about what justifies or motivates the emphasis on each feature. As I mentioned in the introduction, probably the most important feature of getting it oneself is that the knowledge that one acquires is known on one’s own

¹⁰ *Mengzi* 4B14. My translation follows Zhu Xi’s interpretation in his *Mengzi jizhu* (*Collected Commentaries on the Mencius*) 4B14 (in [Zhu 1987](#)).

authority. My working account of knowledge on one's own authority is that in those cases, what warrants the claim that the agent knows something is that it is the proper result of her own processes and faculties of good judgment.¹¹ I find many passages that call attention to this feature. One that is particularly interesting is the following, which uses this feature of *zide* to draw a favorable contrast between Confucian knowledge and Chan (Zen) Buddhist "enlightenment." By their own account, many Chan Buddhists claim that enlightenment is also grasped in a personal way, such that they can know some profound truth for themselves without depending on the authority of others. But Chan Buddhists also have a custom of reassuring their disciples by having a Chan Buddhist master give them a seal to verify that their enlightenment is authentic. As Cheng Hao points out, this seems to suggest that the disciples aren't "getting it themselves."

佛氏言印證者，豈自得也？其自得者，雖甚人言，亦不動。待人之言為是，何自得之有？

¹¹ For present purposes, I prefer an account of "knowledge on one's own authority" that is neutral with respect to a wide range of theories of knowledge. If your theory says that knowing that *p* requires that someone have a good justification for *p*, then it counts as knowledge on my own authority only if *my* justification of *p* warrants the claim that I know that *p*. If your theory says that knowledge that *p* depends on someone having truth-conducive epistemic virtues, then it counts as knowledge on my authority only if it's the truth-conduciveness of *my* epistemic virtues that warrants the claim that I know that *p*. If it turns out that "I know that *p*" is warranted in part by the justificatory process or epistemic virtues of my trusted advisor or friend, then it isn't knowledge on my own authority.

Buddhists speak of having their insights confirmed by their master,¹² but how can this qualify as *zide* (“getting it oneself”)? When people have “gotten it themselves” then their minds should remain unaffected no matter who might comment on their views. How can the views that one “gets oneself” depend on anyone else’s say-so?¹³

There are things we could say in defense of Chan Buddhism here. Maybe the Chan *disciples* don’t get it themselves, but the practice of confirming enlightenment is consistent with the view that the *masters*, at least, do get it themselves. Also, one might point out that there are really two different sorts of achievements here: there’s knowing something, and then there’s being confident that one knows something. Just because the disciples lack confidence that they really do know the doctrine of emptiness or Buddha-nature, it doesn’t necessarily follow that they don’t know the doctrine of emptiness or Buddha-nature. Maybe confidence would require higher-order knowledge (they would need to *know that they know*), which is precisely what the practice of getting a master’s confirmation is supposed to provide.

However, even if Cheng Hao is uncharitable, my point is that he seems to be presupposing that when one gets it oneself, one will know it on one’s own authority and thus won’t need the

¹² “Confirmed” is my approximate translation of *yinzheng* 印證 (*lit.* ‘confirming by seal’). This refers to the verification part of a process called “confirmation by seal of approval” (*yinke zhengming* 印可證明) in Chan Buddhism, whereby Chan Buddhist authorities verify that a person’s enlightenment experience is authentic and then confer public recognition on them, often as members of a particular Chan lineage or tradition.

¹³ Cheng Hao, *Henan Chengshi yishu* 11.67 (in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#)).

further confirmation of an external authority to count as knowing it, and this is evidence that knowing something on one's own authority is an important feature of getting it oneself. As Cheng says, one's "getting it" shouldn't depend on another person's say-so.

3.2 Enhancement of Joy and Epistemic Confidence

Two other oft-mentioned features of *zide* have to do with the quality of wholeheartedness that I mentioned in section 2, understood as having well-integrated feelings, desires, beliefs, and commitments, such that they robustly and consistently support a virtuous course of action. For Zhu and the Chengs, two good indicators of wholeheartedness are (1) a distinctive sort of joy that comes from understanding, and (2) epistemic self-confidence. To give just one representative passage that makes this connection, I offer an intriguing recorded lesson attributed to Cheng Hao. Alluding to a memorable passage in the *Analects* of Confucius (*Analects* 6.20), he starts from the assumption that there is a significant ethical difference between merely loving the Way (the ethical order) and taking joy in it. Taking joy, on my reading, suggests greater psychological integration and wholeheartedness than mere loving. Cheng proposes that truly taking joy in the Way requires "getting it oneself," and proposes (I think) that this is because at the stage of loving the Way, one still regards it as something external, whereas at the stage of taking joy in the Way, it becomes a thing of one's own.

學至於樂則成矣。篤信好學，未知自得之為樂，造道者也。好之者，如游佗人園圃；樂之者，則已物爾。然人只能信道，亦是人之難能也。

Learning isn't complete until it reaches the point of joy. One can “be sincere and love learning” something and yet not know the joy of getting it oneself.¹⁴ Such is the person who is still steeping himself in the Way [i.e., still in the process of learning].¹⁵ When someone merely loves the Way [without deriving joy from getting it himself] it's as if he were touring someone else's garden. *When someone takes joy in the Way [from getting it oneself] it's a thing of his own.*¹⁶ Only then can a person trust in the Way, which is indeed difficult for people to be able to do.¹⁷

So merely loving the Way is like touring someone else's garden, which is a pleasant thing but doesn't elicit the distinctive sort of joy that Cheng believes getting the Way oneself will elicit, and doesn't impart trust or confidence in what one may know. That's because the Way stands to the mere lover as the beautiful plants and objects in another person's garden stand to a person who is merely touring it. In contrast, when one gets it oneself, it's a thing of one's own.

Speculatively, what Cheng means to suggest is that, once a person has acquired knowledge in this way then the knowledge is like an earned possession of which one can take justifiable pride. Even more speculatively, Cheng may also be suggesting that once one gets (something important about) the Way oneself, one's knowledge has a kind of personal immediacy that imparts trust and confidence, trust and confidence that is, just as matter of deep-seated psychological

¹⁴ “Be sincere and love learning” 篤信好學 quotes from *Analects* 8.13.

¹⁵ A reference to *Mencius* 4B14.

¹⁶ This rank ordering of those who “take joy in [the Way]” (*le zhi* 樂之) above those who merely “love [the Way]” (*hao zhi* 好之) references *Analects* 6.20.

¹⁷ Cheng Hao, *Henan Chengshi yishu* 11.116 (in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#)); my emphasis.

disposition, hard to achieve when our beliefs are derived from someone else’s testimony (no matter how reliable we may sincerely believe them to be). It might help to think about the difference it makes to cross a busy street whilst seeing for oneself that there are no oncoming cars, rather than relying on someone else’s say-so that it’s safe to cross. Even if that other person is a most trusted friend or a parent, most of us will feel some trepidation stepping into the street.

3.3 Self-Discovery Aspects

There are some grander and seemingly more theoretically ambitious claims for *zide* that I should mention in the interest of giving a well-rounded sense of the phenomenon. On many descriptions of the experience of getting some profound ethical insight in this distinctive way, it seems as though one finds or discovers the insight *in oneself*.¹⁸ Often they also suggest that getting it oneself consists in part in discovering innate ethical knowledge or activating an innate and fully-formed capacity to know based entirely on one’s own cognitive resources (I think the latter of these two descriptions is more precise). Some twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars of Chinese thought have described this mode of knowledge acquisition as “maieutic” and illustrated it by invoking a famous moment in Plato’s *Meno* where Socrates demonstrates that even an

¹⁸ For example, see Cheng and Cheng, *Henan Chengshi yishu* 17.2 (in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#)), and Zhu Xi, *Sishu huowen* (*Some Questions on the Four Books*) 33.10. All citations of the *Sishu huowen* refer to [Zhu 2001](#) and reference the text by *juan* (“fascicle”) number and passage or paragraph number within that *juan*. For example, the text cited here is identified as “33.10,” indicating that it appears in the 10th passage in *juan* 33.

uneducated boy or slave already knows some axioms of geometry.¹⁹ For ease of reference, we can call these the “self-discovery aspects” of *zide*.

I find the self-discovery aspects fascinating and useful for understanding *zide* phenomenologically. It does seem to me that some of our most notable moments of personal insight are experienced as something akin to discoveries of our own implicit or dormant ideas or beliefs. Sometimes it seems like the insight is one that we had previously but hadn’t fully recognized or articulated, or that it’s just a short inferential step beyond beliefs that we already endorse and deeply understand. Still, if we take the Chengs and Zhu Xi literally then they would appear to hold that we already have a well-formed capacity to know a wide range of ethical views based entirely on our own internal cognitive resources. And I’m with later Confucian critics of Zhu and the Chengs, who say that this strong position has some absurd implications.²⁰ Since this isn’t the main concern of the present chapter, however, I will leave it be for now. It is worth noting that the later Confucian tradition has at least one major advocate for getting it oneself—Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777)—who emphatically rejected the view that we have well-

¹⁹ [Ivanhoe 2000](#): 57n25; [Slingerland 2003](#): 66; [Plato 1961](#): 82d–84b.

²⁰ One of the earliest scholars and translators of Confucian classics, James Legge, found the self-discovery aspects of *zide* too “misty” to take seriously, and tried to downplay them ([Legge 1892](#): 2:22). Theodore de Bary takes Legge to task for this and cites them as evidence of a more religious or “mystical” view ([de Bary 1991](#): 46–7). On my reading, Zhu and the Cheng brothers could have interesting reasons for thinking that these capacities must necessarily be fully formed and innate. Among other things, if they weren’t fully formed and innate then it wouldn’t be possible for us to “get for oneself” the objective implications of one’s reasons. I will say more about this in the next section.

formed faculties of ethical knowledge innately, and it's a sure bet that he'd tell us not to take the appearance of self-discovery too literally (Dai 2009: 267–86).

3.4 Unforced Deliberation

Finally, another intriguing feature of “getting it oneself” has to do with effort expended on the deliberative process itself. Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers stress that this particular type of knowledge acquisition is incompatible with certain kinds of forcing or artificial striving in seeking ethical knowledge. We can call their preferred alternative quality the “unforced” or “spontaneous and natural” quality of deliberation. There are numerous passages that make mention of this quality. Here is the most widely quoted remark by Cheng Hao, reproduced in a popular primer or introduction to Neo-Confucianism that was read by many millions of aspiring scholars in East Asia:

大抵學不言而自得者，乃自得也，有安排布置者，皆非自得也。

Generally speaking, only when you get it naturally through unspoken learning does it truly count as ‘getting it yourself.’ If there is any element of deliberate planning or contrivance then it won’t at all qualify as ‘getting it yourself.’²¹

At this broad level, it is not obvious what specific kinds of deliberation, or which stages in the deliberative process, are supposed to be unforced. Neo-Confucians like Zhu and the Cheng brothers don’t hide the fact that their regimen of ethical education requires perseverance and

²¹ *Jinsi lu* 近思錄 (*Reflections on Things at Hand*) 2.41. All citations of the *Jinsi lu* reference Zhu and Lü 2008 and are identified by *juan* (“fascicle”) number and the paragraph or passage number within that *juan*. For example, the text cited above is cited as “2.41,” indicating that it is the 41st passage in *juan* 2.

work, that students have to develop a sense of commitment and discipline in order to succeed, and that the insights gained are, in many respects, hard-won. But presumably they think that some parts of the deliberative process should come more spontaneously and naturally. In the next section, I will argue that the expectation that the deliberation be spontaneous and natural applies more narrowly to the process of drawing conclusions about specific ethical norms or principles (*daoli* 道理). This allows that there can be other parts of the deliberative process that require forcing or artifice, such as reading philosophical or ethical texts, gathering information about probable consequences, entertaining conceptual possibilities, or pushing oneself to consider a wider range of ethical reasons or considerations than one may currently recognize.

Before looking at the evidence for my reading, however, I should note that some of the features mentioned so far are more central or peripheral—more or less part of the “core meaning” of *zide*—than others. Zhu and the Cheng brothers would surely be reluctant to give up the proposal that *zide* enhances joy and epistemic confidence, but if it turned out that this weren’t typically the case, that wouldn’t make it pointless or completely non-sensical to characterize the relevant sort of knowledge acquisition as *zide*. By contrast, there are two other features mentioned which, if they were absent, really would make the Chinese phrase *zide* non-sensical for participants in this discourse. These are the features that the critical parts of deliberative process should be *unforced* and, to put it crudely for now, that the *self* figures prominently in “getting” it. In the two-character phrase *zide* 自得, the Chinese character *zi* 自 can plausibly be read as an adverbial modifier meaning “naturally” or “spontaneously” or a reflexive adverb roughly equivalent to “of the self” or “of one’s own accord.” If we wanted to emphasize the former sense of *zi* we could translate the phrase “getting it naturally” to suggest that one gets it without artificial compulsion or forcing.

While the textual evidence strongly suggests that the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi saw *both* senses of *zi* as critical for understanding the whole phrase, there may be a slight difference of emphasis between Zhu and the Chengs. As the twentieth-century scholar Wing-tsit Chan 陳榮捷 has observed, Zhu Xi's students were aware of a debate between Zhu and his contemporary Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133–1181) about the relative importance of the naturalness and self in *zide* (Chan 1989: 301). Zhang apparently thought it most important that the object that one “gets” is one's own virtuous nature, and thus emphasized the role of the self in *zide*. Zhu taught that this explanation was defective, perhaps because it neglected to mention the critical quality of spontaneity or naturalness (*ziran* 自然) in deliberation, or maybe because it focused too much on what I have called the “self-discovery aspects” of *zide*. For much of Zhu's life, he took issue with Confucians who suggested that people could directly access or intuit the good ethical ideas and inclinations of their own virtuous natures without engaging in much reading or investigation of the larger world (Angle and Tiwald 2017: 135–55). Zhu may have wanted to downplay self-discovery more than the Cheng brothers themselves. Unfortunately, there is little surviving record of the dispute. A brief mention of it is attributed to Zhu's student Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159–1223) in a Ming dynasty edition and commentary on the *Mencius*, but the original text from which the Ming edition quotes appears to be lost (Chan 1989: 317n64).

Because Zhu Xi was so adamant that people don't neglect the natural or spontaneous quality of *zide*, Chan concludes that when the phrase is used in Zhu Xi's sense it is best translated as “getting it in the natural way” (Chan 1989: 302). My own view is that *zide*'s most essential feature is, roughly put, reliance on the self's own epistemic processes and aptitudes. That is why it seemed absurd that Buddhist enlightenment could count as acquired through *zide* only if it is confirmed by a master, as we saw in section 3.1. It also explains why Zhu is so adamant that

epistemic agents must take certain steps themselves in order to count as “getting it” in the right way, as we will see in section 5. It might be that Zhu Xi sought to downplay the self-discovery aspects of *zide*, but he still sought to underscore the self’s pivotal part in acquiring the relevant knowledge and found *zide* a felicitous phrase for that reason.

4. Inferential Force

The view that deliberation in *zide* must be unforced is a little surprising at first pass. If we think about other areas of inquiry where knowledge based on one’s own authority is preferred, it doesn’t seem to matter all that much whether the relevant deliberations were forced or free and spontaneous. It seems odd to suggest that someone’s novel mathematical proof or penetrating insight into the beauty of a piece of music is any less autonomous just because she had to push herself to find a solution or explanation. So why should autonomous ethical knowledge be any different?

In de Bary’s discussions of *zide*, he seems to understand the unforced or spontaneous quality of getting it oneself as evidence for what he calls “individualism” in Neo-Confucian thought. What he appears to have in mind by “individualism” are a cluster of overlapping commitments to social and individual behavioral norms such as independence of thought, individual expression, and epistemic self-reliance, provided that one is entitled to these things in virtue of one’s status as an individual self or individual person and not, say, one’s social position or class (de Bary 1991: 2–7, 68–97). If Neo-Confucian individualism didn’t permeate into the general culture, he suggests, that’s primarily because imperial China never realized the institutional structures that help nurture and protect such norms on a large scale, but the ideological commitment to individualism was present in China’s leading thinkers at the time (de Bary 1991: 265–7). In

another work he suggests that *zide* is evidence of a “liberal tradition” in Neo-Confucian-era China, understood as a commitment to free and open inquiry and individual creativity in thought (de Bary 1983: 58–66). He finds individualism evident in the writings of Zhu and the Cheng brothers, especially in their remarks on *zide*, but he takes them to be on the more moderate end of what seems to be an individualist-holist spectrum (“holism” is his word for the opposite of individualism). His most compelling example of individualism (and liberalism) is the radical Ming-dynasty Neo-Confucian Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602). Famously, Li Zhi prized a certain sort of authenticity (*zhen* 真) in one’s art, literature, and ethical behavior, which in a famous essay he described as the spontaneous expressions of one’s own highly particularistic “child-mind” (*tongxin* 童心).²²

I admit to being a little unclear about what, precisely, de Bary means by “individualism” and “liberalism.” My sense, however, is that whatever he may mean by these terms, we would do well to pay attention to two different ways of accounting for the unforced and spontaneous quality in one’s process of learning. The first proposes that the unforced or spontaneous quality of *zide* is justified by a cognitive requirement, made necessary by the nature of *zide* itself or the type of knowledge or understanding that it is supposed to produce. The other tempting way is to see the unforced and spontaneous quality of *zide* as justified by some cognition-independent social value, such as the value of free and open inquiry as fundamental features of a just society, or the value of autonomy as such, or the value of being an authentic individual, true to one’s

²² See de Bary 1991, 203–70. For Li Zhi’s essay on the child-mind see Li 1961: 98–9. For English translations see Tiwald and Van Norden 2014: 304–7 or Li 2016: 106–10. For a scholarly overview of Li Zhi’s ethics of authenticity see Lee 2013.

child-mind and heedless of social pressures. My sense is that de Bary thinks the unforced and spontaneous quality of *zide* is justified by cognition-independent values of the latter sort, which suggests commitments to individualism and liberalism that go deep and have relatively broad implications.

But I am skeptical. I happily concede that there are some Neo-Confucians who do treat independence of thought and authenticity as independent values, and of these, Li Zhi is probably the most outstanding example. But in the Cheng-Zhu account of *zide*, I think there's a very different concern at work. They think getting it oneself is unforced and spontaneous because that is generally a necessary condition for judgments free of certain biases—namely, biases that interfere with our ability to appreciate how certain conclusions follow from certain reasons, which I am calling appreciation of the inferential force of one's reasons. Perhaps they would have appealed to an independent commitment to individualism to justify ease and spontaneity in ethical deliberation and judgment, but if so, their promotion of ease and spontaneity was overdetermined. Their devotion to forms of inquiry necessary for unbiased appreciation of inferential force gave them reason enough to endorse the particular sort of ease and spontaneity that they did.

I will start to make my reading more plausible by providing more context for the widely-read quotation on *zide*'s unforced quality given in section 3.4. Here are Cheng Hao's full remarks, with the additional material (material omitted from the Neo-Confucian primer's version) in italics:

學不言而自得者，乃自得也。有安排布置者，皆非自得也。然必潛心積慮，優游饜飫於其間，然後可以有得。若急迫求之，則是私己而已，終不足以得之也。

Only when you get it naturally through unspoken learning does it truly count as “getting it yourself.” If there is any element of deliberate planning or contrivance then it won’t at all qualify as “getting it yourself.” *You must concentrate your mind and accumulate your thoughts and then wander among them in a carefree manner, having your fill of them. Only then can you “get it.” If you seek it in haste or under pressure then it becomes a mere selfish pursuit, so that in the end it will be insufficient to “get it.”*²³

In the longer passage, there is a strong suggestion that the unforced and spontaneous quality is meant to forestall a certain kind of selfishness, one that prevents us from having the right relation to or grasp of the knowledge in question (from “getting it”). This is consistent with a pervasive feature of Neo-Confucian moral psychology, which is its thoroughgoing concern with self-serving biases and motivated reasoning. In one memorable passage, for example, Zhu says that people must guard against the habit of seeking fault only with rival views, which he likens to the frame of mind of people hearing litigation.²⁴ Like numerous other philosophers in the Neo-Confucian era, many of the virtues and habits of thought that Zhu and the Chengs were interested

²³ Cheng Hao, as quoted in Zhu Xi, *Mengzi jizhu (Collected Commentaries on the Mencius)* 4B14 (in [Zhu 1987](#)); my emphasis.

²⁴ *Zhuzi yulei (The Classified Sayings of Master Zhu)*, 11.73 and 11.80. All citations of the *Zhuzi yulei* refer to [Zhu 1986](#) and identify text by *juan* (“fascicle”) number and by passage number within that *juan*. For example, the passages cited here are identified as “11.73 and 11.80,” indicating that they are the 73rd and 80th passages in *juan* 11. For an English translation of these passages see [Chu 1990](#): 150–1.

in were meant to undercut incipient “selfish thoughts” or “selfish inclinations” (*siyi* 私意), which they took to be responsible for so much self-serving rationalization and moral failure (Angle and Tiwald 2017: 145–51). I suggest that we add a linked pair to the long list of techniques that combat or blunt the effects of self-serving cognitive biases, a pair that Cheng here describes as “wandering among [one’s thoughts] in a carefree manner” and “having your fill of them” (*youyou yanyu yu qijian* 優游饜飫於其閒). The idea seems to be that by gathering ideas and considering them in a relatively carefree frame of mind, one can come to see for oneself without self-serving bias what conclusions should be drawn from those ideas—or, as I will argue shortly, the reasons implicit in those ideas.

Further evidence for this interpretation is that the unforced or spontaneous quality of getting it oneself is stage-specific and content-specific. That is, it is not the entire process of getting it oneself that is supposed to be unforced, but rather the process at just those times when we need to figure out what inferences or conclusions to draw about some important matter of inherent or direct ethical significance, typically described by Zhu and the Cheng brothers as matters of the human Way (or “the Way” for short). There can be other work that is very much forced and doesn’t come so naturally. The most obvious candidate is the “thought-gathering” work, when we read widely or listen carefully to gather ideas and competing views. In the passage above, Cheng Hao seems to suggest that there’s a stage in which we “concentrate the mind” and “gather thoughts.” Wandering in a carefree manner comes after that, seemingly when it is time to decide what conclusions to draw from the thoughts presented. Zhu Xi replicates some of Cheng’s stage-sensitive language in one of his descriptions of the process. His account also makes it clear that the conclusions drawn in this unforced manner are ethical in content, conclusions that disclose

something important about “moral principles” or “moral patterns” (*daoli* 道理) or the Way (*Dao* 道):

道理本自廣大，只是潛心積慮，緩緩養將去，自然透熟。若急迫求之，則是起意去趕趁他，只是私意而已，安足以入道！

The moral principles [*daoli*] are inherently broad in scope. You just need to concentrate your mind and accumulate thoughts, then proceed to nourish them oh-so-gradually so that naturally they will ripen until you are intimately familiar with them. If you seek the principles in haste or under pressure then this will arouse an inclination to rush the pursuit of them, so that you end up with nothing but selfish thoughts, and how could that suffice to enter the Way?²⁵

In another passage, Zhu indicates that getting it oneself does in fact require a great deal of effort and exertion, but stipulates that the effort shouldn't be motivated by a push to get to the conclusion of one's deliberations. The conclusion should come naturally and unbidden:

必也，多致其力而不急其功，必務其方而不躐其等，則雖不期於必得而其自然得之。

What's required is that you apply more of your effort to the task without becoming anxious about the result, and that you attend fully to the procedure without skipping over any steps. Then, even though you won't have any predetermined expectation of getting it you will naturally get it yourself.²⁶

²⁵ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei* 95.150 (in Zhu 1986).

²⁶ Zhu Xi, *Sishu huowen* 33.10 (in Zhu 2001).

I think the evidence is clear that Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers were adamant about “not forcing” the *zide* process because they were concerned that forcing would give rise to inclinations to rush the conclusion, which in turn cause or perhaps manifest as self-serving cognitive biases and motivated reasoning. What is perhaps less clear is the nature of the thing that they thought our unforced and spontaneous cognition was supposed to track. I propose that we understand this thing as “inferential force of reasons.” Roughly, this is that relational or intrinsic property of reasons—whatever it consists in—that makes it appropriate to draw certain conclusions from them. The attitude that we’re supposed to adopt toward that inferential force I call “appreciation,” which I take to combine understanding and motivation. When we appreciate something, we both understand what makes it valuable or worth promoting and we have some inclination (even if a very weak one) to promote or protect it.

Another bit of textual evidence for this interpretation is more impressionistic but more vivid, and it has to do with a popular metaphor used to illustrate the sort of thing that the later Confucians have in mind by “getting it oneself.” According to a famous passage in the *Analects* of Confucius (a canonical source text for the Neo-Confucians), Confucius says that he is only interested in teaching students who are proactive learners, such that when Confucius “holds up one corner” they will “come back to him with the other three.”²⁷ Figuratively speaking, the passage implies that teacher and students are engaged in the process of specifying the shape or angle of three corners of a quadrilateral, with the teacher providing dimensions for just one corner and the students filling in the rest. The Neo-Confucians take this image to capture succinctly the work of getting it oneself, which consists in showing how certain conclusions (the

²⁷ *Analects* 7.8; Slingerland translation (2003), slightly modified.

angles of the other three corners) follow from ideas taken as sound or given (the angle of one corner). And it is critical that the answers be generated by students themselves and not provided by the teacher. As Cheng Hao explains in his own elucidation of the “three corners” metaphor, sage teachers of ancient times “taught by pointing out what wasn’t the case” rather than giving their students answers outright.²⁸ This strongly suggests that it is not enough for the teacher to tell students that certain views or ideas should lead them to certain conclusions; the students have to figure out for themselves that the views or ideas can be seen as reasons to reach ethically significant conclusions, and which specific conclusions they are reasons for.

Zhu and the Cheng brothers don’t talk about the inferential force of reasons by name, but they had a great deal of interest in reasons, and were keenly interested in the role and function of inference-making in the acquisition of epistemic goods. In a recent book on Neo-Confucianism, Stephen Angle and I highlight some long-neglected text in the work of Zhu Xi that makes his views relatively explicit. There, Zhu distinguishes between three types of ethical knowledge (or perhaps three types of knowledge-ascriptions). The first is when one knows a particular rule of behavior but knows it because the tradition and wise individuals affirm it. The second is when one knows a particular rule of behavior and can’t resist the power of that rule, but don’t have any explicit understanding of the reasons for the rule (think of someone who suddenly sees a child teetering at the edge of a well and about to fall in—Zhu suggests that we can know that we ought to save the child without really knowing why). The third and most important sort of ethical knowledge Zhu calls “knowing the reasons why it is so” (*zhi qi suoyiran zhi gu* 知其所以然之故). I take the “reasons” in question to be those that disclose the grounds for an

²⁸ *Henan Chengshi yishu* 11.67 (in [Cheng and Cheng 1981](#)).

ethical norm, and not just any reasons to believe an ethical norm to be right. “Easily preventing an innocent, sentient being and those who love her from suffering unnecessary harm” could be a “reason why it is so” for the rule that we should save an endangered child. “Wise sages say that you should save endangered children” or “the only people I know who wouldn’t save endangered children are shiftless characters” are not “reasons why it is so” for the rule. Angle and I also observed that when Zhu uses the Chinese character *tui* 推 in the sense of “inference,” he tends to use it in one of two ways. First, he thinks we infer reason A from claims B, C, and D, when we see that A best harmonizes with or coheres with B, C, and D. Zhu models this kind of inference when, for example, he shows how the work of certain virtues is analogous to the different behavior of living things in different seasons of the year, all of which works in concert to sustain and reproduce life. Second, there is a special and critical sort of inference that Zhu sometimes calls “inference based on similarity in kind” (*leitui* 類推). Very roughly, this is the sort of inference one makes when one sees two ethical scenarios as relevantly similar to one another, so that one sees how a conclusion that applies to one should apply to the other as well.²⁹ This latter sort provides a particularly powerful example of inferential force, so let me illustrate it by using an example that Zhu and the Cheng brothers would have been well acquainted with.

In the canonical Confucian text known in the West as the *Mencius* (also as the *Mengzi* 孟子), Mencius himself makes an interesting observation about public corruption. He notes that many public officials accept bribes for political favors, which is shameful and self-debasing, but don’t seem to appreciate or fully recognize it as shameful and self-debasing. In contrast, he observes, there are other scenarios where the shamefulness and self-debasingness of similar behavior is

²⁹ Angle and Tiwald 2017: 39–40, 127–9.

plain to see. He gives the example of receiving and eating food given in a way that is meant to humiliate the receiver. Imagine that you are a beggar, he says, so deprived of food that you are on the verge of starvation. And imagine that someone offers you food but stomps or spits on it, and then presumably stands back and waits for you to eat it nonetheless, thereby making a spectacle of yourself to the delight of the giver and passers-by. Most people, Mencius suggests, would refuse to eat food offered to them in this manner, and that's because the shameful and self-debasement is plain to see. And yet state officials debase themselves for a great deal less. After all, how much does a larger house and more chariots really add to one's life compared to the value of preserving one's own life itself?³⁰

Not everyone shares Mencius' view (which must have been ubiquitous in his time and place) that accepting food given with open contempt is so self-debasing that one would sooner starve. Even so, I think most of us can at least appreciate a beggar's reluctance to make a spectacle of himself for the entertainment of some higher-status bully, so there is a sense in which we can appreciate more readily and intuitively the self-debasing quality of accepting food given with contempt than we can the self-debasing quality of accepting a bribe. Furthermore, it is quite plausible that accepting a bribe in return for giving a special political favor is self-debasing in a relevantly similar way. It makes oneself the instrument of someone else's vicious scheme, and makes one complicit in one's own instrumentalization.³¹ Framed in that way, it seems hard to resist the conclusion that accepting a bribe is similarly shameful. Insofar as someone finds it

³⁰ *Mencius* 6A10.

³¹ For more on this thought experiment in the *Mencius*, see [Van Norden 2007](#): 218–23. My analysis closely follows his. For another vivid example of the use of analogy to elicit autonomous moral knowledge (or moral understanding), see [Hills 2020](#): 6–7.

hard to resist drawing that conclusion merely for the reasons given, one appreciates the inferential force of the reasons for not taking bribes.

5. Implications of the Inferential Force Reading

5.1 Auto-Epistemic Proximity

If this reading of Zhu and the Chengs on “getting it oneself” (*zide*) is correct, then it points the way to a rich array of new interpretations and lines of inquiry, not just in the history of East Asian thought but in twenty-first-century global philosophy as well. The first concerns a certain metric or dimension of measurement in Neo-Confucian epistemology. My reading so far has pointed to one factor that can account for failure to appreciate the inferential force of reasons: a person might have self-serving cognitive biases that interfere with her ability to do so. But that is not the only factor that Zhu and the Chengs theorize about. More generally, both Zhu and the Cheng brothers are known for emphasizing a certain dimension or factor that also accounts for successes and failures to know, one that is hinted at in their famous imperative to “reflect on things nearby” (*jinsi* 近思, sometimes translated as “reflect on things at hand”). Preliminarily, we could call this dimension “epistemic proximity.” The idea is that for purposes of gaining knowledge, some objects of knowledge are “closer” and others are “further away” to one’s pre-existing knowledge, so that if you want to come to have the right epistemic grasp of some difficult (distant) object of knowledge, you would do well to approach it in a stepwise manner from objects that are nearer to things that you already know. Both Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi took

epistemic proximity to be a factor in knowing by inference based on similarity in kind (*leitui*).

Zhu Xi illustrates the relation between the two in his answer to a student's question:

楊問：「程子曰：『近思，以類而推。』何謂類推？」

曰：「。。。不要跳越望遠，亦不是縱橫陡頓，只是就這裏近傍那曉得處挨將去。如這一件事理會得透了，又因這件事推去做那一件事，知得亦是恁地。如識得這燈有許多光，便因這燈推將去，識得那燭亦恁地光。如升階，升第一級了，便因這一級進到第二級，又因第三級進到四級。只管恁地挨將去，只管見易，不見其難，前面遠處只管會近。若第一級便要跳到第三級，舉步闊了便費力，只管見難，只管見遠。。。如理會得親親，便推類去仁民，仁民是親親之類。理會得仁民，便推類去愛物，愛物是仁民之類。」

[A student] asked: “Cheng [Yi] said that to reflect on things nearby is to take what’s similar in kind and draw inferences from that³² What is meant by ‘inferring from what’s similar kind [*leitui*]’?”

Zhu Xi replied: ... You shouldn't skip over steps while gazing too far ahead. Nor should you wander off in this or that direction or come to abrupt stops. You should begin nearby at a place you know and then go on from there. If you thoroughly understand *this* one thing and you go on to make inferences about *that* thing on the basis of this one, then your knowledge of the latter will be a certain way. If you see how *this* lamp emits a certain amount of light and make inferences from this lamp, then you will know how *that* candle emits light like that. It's like ascending a flight of stairs. Having climbed onto the first step one can then on the basis of that first step advance to the second step, and also on the basis of the third step advance to

³² Henan Chengshi yishu 22A.30 (in Cheng and Cheng 1981).

the fourth step. Only attend to whatever is adjacent and proceed from there. Only concern yourself with looking to what's easy and not to what's difficult. When you face a distant objective just concern yourself with grasping what is near. If you want to skip from the first step to the third, then your strides will be too broad and the effort you exert will only be wasted on looking to what's difficult and far away.... For example, when you truly understand love of your family you then can, by inferring from what's similar in kind, go on to understand humane love for people in general, for humane love of people in general is of the same kind as love of family. And when you truly understand humane love of people in general you can, by inferring from what's similar in kind, come to understand care for animals, for care for animals and humane love of people in general are similar in kind.³³

In short, there is something in virtue of which one cannot know (the value and ethical import of) care for animals unless one first knows (the value and ethical import of) humane love of people in general, and for similar reasons one must know love of family before either of the other two. This is due to the fact that love of family is epistemically closer than the other two to our natural or inborn knowledge, and that humane love of people in general is epistemically closer to love of family than care for animals. This much, I think, is relatively clear and already of some significance for Neo-Confucian epistemology. What is easy to overlook is that the real concern is not knowledge of all kinds, but what we might call autonomous knowledge—knowledge that one

³³ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei* 49.27 (in [Zhu 1986](#)); emphasis added. “Love of family,” “humane love of people in general,” and “care for animals” are presented as three different kinds and degrees of care in *Mencius* 7A45.

“gets oneself”—in particular. Two considerations should make this relatively clear. First, it is hard to see why there should be a fixed, stepwise manner by which to approach knowledge of any kind, and it is hard to see why the relative ease or difficulty of knowing it should correlate with those steps. There are many facts that can be very difficult to know but are nevertheless knowable so long as one has access to reliable sources, such as the numerical value of *pi* or obscure facts about ancient history. So epistemic proximity must be a factor in acquiring a certain subset of knowledge, not knowledge of all types. Second, Zhu Xi is never more adamant about following a stepwise process of knowledge acquisition than when discussing “getting it oneself.” We saw in section 5 a passage in which Zhu states that one can’t naturally or spontaneously get the conclusion for oneself if one “skips steps” or fails to attend closely to the proper procedure.³⁴ The language there echoes the language about skipping steps that we see in this passage. It seems a relatively safe assumption that when Zhu Xi speaks about the necessary stepwise manner in which one makes inferences based on similarity in kind, that stepwise manner is necessary in part because of the cognitive requirements for getting it oneself. Epistemic agents need to be able to reach their own, unforced conclusions about moral principles or the Way, and that can’t happen unless they already grasp other objects of knowledge that resemble them closely enough to appreciate their similar implications. With this in mind, I suggest that it would be better to characterize epistemic proximity as a factor not in knowledge-acquisition more generally but in acquiring autonomous ethical knowledge (the knowledge that properly comes from *getting* the Way or moral principles *oneself*) in particular. Accordingly, it

³⁴ Zhu Xi, *Sishu huowen* 33.10 (in [Zhu 2001](#)).

would be more precise to call the relevant factor *auto*-epistemic proximity, and to say that it applies paradigmatically or most clearly to the acquisition of ethical knowledge.

5.2 A Non-Mystical Interpretation of “Unspoken Learning”

Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers frequently allude to the fact that “getting it oneself” depends on elements of the learning process that cannot be fully articulated in language.³⁵ As Cheng Hao says in that quotable line from the Neo-Confucian primer, “Only when you get it naturally through unspoken learning does it truly count as ‘getting it yourself.’”³⁶ Many scholars have read this as an indication of mysticism in Neo-Confucian philosophy. De Bary’s brief discussion of the issue is representative. He notes that for both the Cheng brothers and for Zhu Xi, the ultimate aim or goal in getting it oneself is to merge or unite one’s self with a greater whole, and that describing the process in language effectively trivializes it, reducing it to a normal course of study (de Bary 1991: 46–7).

For my part, I certainly don’t want to deny that some post-classical Confucians characterize the ultimate goal in terms of forming a unity with a greater whole, and that there are parts or aspects of this experience that are ineffable. But it is worth noting that some Neo-Confucians actively resisted mystical interpretations of the ultimate goal. Zhu Xi, for example, complained that rival scholars who treated the experience of “forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” as fundamentally mysterious were, for that very reason, unable to articulate what

³⁵ Zhu Xi, *Mengzi jizhu* 4B14 (in Zhu 1987) and *Sishu huowen* 33.10 (in Zhu 2001).

³⁶ *Jinsi lu* 2.41 (in Zhu and Lü 2008), translated in section 3.4 of this chapter.

one must do in order to achieve this goal.³⁷ In any case, we don't need to presuppose mysticism in order to make sense of the “unspoken” (*buyan* 不言) aspect of getting it oneself. Given the context in which it is mentioned, the more plausible explanation is just that there are epistemic conditions required for *zide* that ordinary speakers of a language cannot meet merely by knowing more linguistic propositions.

A good example of such an achievement is what I call appreciation of the inferential force of reasons. On my reading of Zhu and the Cheng brothers on inference based on similarity in kind, there will be cases where some people have the right pre-existing knowledge and frame of mind to see relevant similarities and others lack them. In these cases, there is nothing more that one can say to help the latter group recognize the inferential force of the relevant reasons. Imagine two people—Persuadable Pam and Intransigent Isaac—both of whom fail to fully grasp the shamefulness of accepting a bribe for a special political favor. And further imagine that when their teacher compares accepting bribes to accepting food given with contempt, Pam realizes that accepting a bribe would be very shameful and Isaac does not. What might make the difference between Pam's persuadability and Isaac's intransigence (or ignorance)? Admittedly, there might be some propositions that would tip Isaac over to Pam's side. For example, it might help to point out all the ways in which accepting bribes contributes to a culture of corruption, one that tends to reward people for morally arbitrary advantages like having more wealth or being born into the right family. However, my sense of Zhu and the Cheng brothers is that they still think there will be many cases where moral novices like Isaac will remain unmoved (unreceptive to the inferential force of the relevant reasons) no matter what a skillful teacher might say at the

³⁷ Zhu Xi, *Renshou* 仁說 (“Treatise on Benevolence”), in [Zhu 1996](#): 3542–4 (*juan* 67).

moment. Some will fully appreciate how accepting a bribe for special political favors is self-debasing and others will not. If my reading is correct, one likely explanation for the difference between the Pams and Isaacs in this scenario is that the Pams have more auto-epistemically proximate knowledge—that is, they have already gotten for themselves how situations similar to the bribery scenario are self-debasing and shameful, probably from some combination of ethical reflection and life experience. Many of the Isaacs, by contrast, won't have gotten enough of the relevantly similar scenarios to fully appreciate the reasons not to accept a bribe. In Zhu Xi's terms, they will be like someone who is trying to acquire autonomous knowledge of care for animals without yet having the right grasp of humane love of people in general. For such people, words will not make a meaningful difference, and yet no more words are needed for the Pams to appreciate the various ways in which accepting a bribe is wrong.³⁸ Getting it for oneself depends on “learning without words” in these respects.

³⁸ On my reading, in fact, Pam's appreciation of the inferential force of the relevant reasons doesn't even require that she represent the reasons as propositions. For example, it should be enough that she can see the relevant similarities between accepting a bribe and accepting food given with contempt. That will often be enough to get her see why accepting a bribe would be wrong, even if she never represents it as “self-debasing” or “shameful” in her mind. Philip J. Ivanhoe writes about a similar sort of ethical insight in his accounts of “extension” (*tui* or *da*) in the *Mencius*. Just as one can hear a major 7th chord in one key and thereby learn to recognize it in other keys without knowing much of anything about the nature of the major 7th chord, one can recognize the shamefulness in accepting a bribe by seeing the similarity to accepting food given with contempt without knowing much about the nature of that shamefulness (see [Ivanhoe 2002](#)). So long as Pam's recognition of the shamefulness is appropriately

It might be tempting to understand the role of inference-making in *zide* somewhat differently. The textual evidence seems to suggest that when a person gets some important ethical insight for herself, she is making her own inferences from the relevant reasons to the proper conclusion. Some might think the activity of making one's own inferences is the crucial feature of getting it oneself and that it is otiose to speculate about some further requirement – “appreciation of inferential force.” I am sympathetic with the aversion to positing too many extraneous entities, but the achievement of making correct inferences on one's own doesn't suffice to account for the value and function of getting it oneself. Imagine a slightly different version of Intransigent Isaac, someone who doesn't really see how accepting a bribe for a special favor is self-debasing in the same way that accepting food given with contempt is self-debasing. Still, he suspects that others will see some similarity between the two scenarios and recognizes that something important is supposed to follow from this similarity. Accordingly, he makes an informed guess and decides that accepting a bribe must also be wrong. Isaac has made his own inferences, but it seems like something quite important is lacking. I suggest that we can best account for what's missing by talking about his failure to appreciate the inferential force of the relevant reasons, using language (“reasons” and “inference”) that closely tracks the language that Zhu Xi uses in talking about ideal ethical knowledge and getting it oneself.

5.3 The Metaphysics of Objective Inferential Force

responsive to the shameful-making features of accepting a bribe, that will provide her with the reasons to consider it shameful (and thus wrong) in the relevant sense.

My reading of Zhu and the Chengs on *zide* likely has significant implications for their metaphysics. For people of a certain anti-metaphysical temperament, it might be tempting to say that what I have been calling “the inferential force of reasons” can be explained away by reference to subjective psychological dispositions. Maybe, when self-serving biases have been cleared away and agents continue to feel the pull of the idea that accepting bribes is wrong, all they are feeling is a contingent, subjective attraction to the view that accepting bribes is wrong, or perhaps they are expressing a contingent, subjective preference that political officials should not accept bribes. Similarly, when Zhu and the Chengs talk about care for animals being more proximate to humane love of people than to love of family, perhaps all they mean is that human beings, given the psychology that we happen to have, are more inclined to “get” care for animals for themselves if they already “get” humane love of people in general for themselves. But this is just an accident of human cognition and emotion, not accountable to any objective fact of the matter.

To be sure, there are some Neo-Confucians that arguably come close to flirting with subjective metaethical positions that could be consistent with these views. However, Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers are emphatically not Neo-Confucians of that strong, subjectivist kind. As I and other have tried to show in our work on the debates between them and their Buddhist counterparts, one of their great preoccupations was specifying theories and methods of moral knowledge acquisition such that our moral convictions and behavior aren’t just expressing subjective whims or contingent features of human psychology. If someone did propose that inferential force could be fully explained by contingent inclinations or predispositions to accept that a certain ethical conclusion follows from a certain ethical reason, they would have been quick to call attention to this as a dangerous theoretical seed of Buddhist subjectivism, just as

they did other worrisome concessions to subjectivism in less orthodox Neo-Confucian rivals (Angle and Tiwald 2017: 71-88; Zhu 2019: 148–60). Inferential force thus requires that we posit some entity to account for the existence and objectivity of inferential force. Zhu Xi illustrates auto-epistemic proximity by comparing objects of knowledge to steps in a staircase. Just as objective facts about the physical arrangement of a staircase help account for the fact that we must get from step one to step three by way of step two, so too do objective facts about reasons and their inferential force help explain why we must get from love of family to care for animals by way of humane love for people in general.

Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that part of what so concerned them about selfish inclinations in reasoning—part of what motivated them to insist that the appreciation of inferential force should be without self-serving bias—is that they feared motivated reasoning would interfere with our ability to track the objective force of the reasons. In fact, my reading of *zide* raises an interesting question which I take to be in the background of some of Zhu’s and the Cheng’s metaphysics—namely, what guarantees that we even have the capacity to appreciate objective inferential force in the first place?

The short answer, I think, is their famous metaphysical view that ethical norms are grounded in Heavenly (and thus objective) patterns or principles of good order (*Tianli* 天理) and, at the same time, that these Heavenly patterns are manifest in our own nature, so that we will feel some natural inclination to endorse and follow them once selfish inclinations and desires are cleared away. Heavenly patterns are thus both objective and an essential constituent of our natural psychology (Angle and Tiwald 2017: 50–69). One way to explain why they arrived at this provocative and challenging metaphysical thesis is to suggest that they needed Heavenly patterns to account both for the objectivity and for the natural psychological pull of the inferential force

of reasons. But this is an ambitious and somewhat speculative line of argument that I don't have the space to pursue here.

5.4 Moral Deference and Moral Understanding

In twenty-first-century anglophone philosophy, there is a burgeoning literature on the use of testimonial moral knowledge, moral deference, and moral expertise. Very roughly, philosophers that are sometimes called “testimony pessimists” argue that there is something objectionable about claims to have moral knowledge on the authority of others, as when a novice claims to know that she should adopt a vegetarian diet simply because she trusts (even if for good reasons) a reliable expert on animal and environmental ethics. Moreover, what's objectionable about this sort of deference is peculiar to moral knowledge and not so problematic for non-moral knowledge.³⁹ On most accounts, “testimony optimists” deny that this sort of deference is problematic or, more often, that the problem is peculiar to moral knowledge (what's objectionable about this sort of deference in the context of moral knowledge is objectionable about deference in the context of non-moral knowledge as well).⁴⁰ In certain respects, the contemporary debate between testimony pessimists and testimony optimists overlaps with the historical debate between proponents of pervasive moral deference like Xunzi and defenders of getting it oneself like Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers.⁴¹ Most notably, Alison Hills has argued

³⁹ Hills 2009, 2010; McGrath 2011.

⁴⁰ Enoch 2014, Sliwa 2012.

⁴¹ One major difference is that in the Confucian debate, even the staunchest defenders of moral deference will admit that deference is problematic—it's just that its problems are outweighed or canceled by the

against moral deference by proposing that testimony-based knowledge cannot by itself give a moral agent enough insight for her to have good character and moral worth. Good character and moral worth require something more robust than moral knowledge, something Hills calls moral *understanding* (Hills 2009). In several respects, her account of moral understanding resembles what I have been calling autonomous knowledge, the sort of knowledge that we acquire through getting it oneself. For example, there are a variety of abilities that someone with understanding of a moral proposition will necessarily have but which someone with mere knowledge of a moral proposition is not guaranteed to have. Agents with understanding of a moral proposition can follow explanations of it and draw their own conclusions about the proposition in various ways (Hills 2009: 98–104). Furthermore, Hills says that understanding a moral proposition requires what she calls a “grasp” of the reasons for that proposition, and her account of grasping reasons seems compatible with my account of appreciating the inferential force of reasons (Hills 2009: 100–1).

This points to a wealth of interesting areas of cross-cultural inquiry. To start, one notable difference between Neo-Confucian *zide* and Hills’ “moral understanding” is that the former phrase was used specifically to distinguish autonomous from deference-based forms of knowledge acquisition, and then discussed and refined over several centuries of Neo-Confucian discourse. By contrast, “moral understanding,” at least as the phrase is used in natural language,

greater hazards of letting moral novices decide for themselves (as explained in section 2 of this chapter). Another major difference is that there aren’t testimony pessimists who argue, as Sarah McGrath does, that our discomfort with moral deference reveals our deep commitment to antirealist or non-realist metaethics (McGrath 2011). In fact, some of the Confucian tradition’s strongest would-be proponents of testimony pessimism qualify as the tradition’s most adamant metaethical realists.

does not track this distinction so neatly. Ordinary speakers of English are comfortable saying that they “understand” veganism or vegetarianism even if they don’t actually know veganism or vegetarianism to be true or correct. So long as they have some grasp of the reasons for these dietary practices and, perhaps, can appreciate the normative appeal of them in some counterfactual sense, most will count themselves as having the right sort of understanding. This does not prevent philosophers from stipulating that “moral understanding” in the relevant sense should describe a narrower range of epistemic states or abilities, as Hills does (2009: 99). But it does suggest that the Neo-Confucians had a much longer time to think about and refine their use of the relevant term of art, a term that they sometimes used in ordinary discourse and not just in philosophical letters, commentaries, and treatises. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that *zide* will take account of a wider range of human experience and will be used more adroitly (and perhaps more organically—that is, without always adhering to one account or definition) in their writings.

I take “getting it oneself” to describe a type of knowledge acquisition, not, strictly speaking, a form of knowledge or understanding itself. However, it is worth asking what the Neo-Confucian philosophers would make of the distinction between moral knowledge and moral understanding in Hills’ sense. In one intriguing passage, Zhu Xi proposes that there is a difference between “getting” (*de* 得) some normative pattern or principle (*li*) and “getting it oneself” (*zide* 自得). He spells out that difference in terms of an analogy to making some room or building one’s home. When one merely “gets” the normative pattern, that is like having a place to dwell. But when one gets it oneself, he says, that is like being comfortable and feeling secure (*an* 安) in one’s dwelling, as when living in a home that is well suited to one’s domestic

habits and daily life.⁴² On one reading of this suggestive metaphor, this implies that grasping reasons for a moral view helps to ensure that one stably affirms or endorses the view, but that something further is needed—something available only to autonomous epistemic agents—in order to make one truly comfortable with it.

Finally, I find no twenty-first-century philosopher who takes as much interest in some of the features of *zide* that I have explicated in this study. There is little discussion of what I have called the self-discovery aspects of autonomous knowledge acquisition, or of a possible requirement that certain sorts of moral conclusions should come from the relevant reasons spontaneously or naturally. There is no discussion at all of what I am calling auto-epistemic proximity as a factor in the acquisition of moral understanding. And there are, I am sure, many more questions raised by the Neo-Confucians that present-day testimony pessimists and optimists would do well to entertain. In these respects among many others, there is still much that is rich in epistemic, ethical, and psychological significance and texture that could be revealed through cross-cultural work. An important step in this direction will be to translate more of the relevant Chinese materials and conduct historically and philosophically sensitive studies of both moral deference and getting it oneself in Confucian thought.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced an important term from the moral epistemology of Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers, “getting it oneself” or *zide*. At first pass, the most notable feature of getting it oneself appears to be that it is Zhu’s and the Cheng’s alternative to problematic moral

⁴² Zhu Xi, *Sishu huowen* 33.10 (in [Zhu 2001](#)).

deference. This suggests that what matters most about it is that what we know by getting it ourselves is something that we know on our own authority. But as I have shown, there is a great deal more to getting it oneself than that. There is also a general predisposition to elicit greater joy in knowledge acquisition and greater confidence in one's knowledge. There is a distinctive phenomenology: when we get it ourselves, it seems to us as though we've discovered something about ourselves. More controversially, I have argued that an indispensable feature of getting it oneself is what I call the unbiased appreciation of the inferential force of reasons. Although they don't talk about this feature in precisely those terms, I have argued that my interpretation makes better sense of the evidence than other candidates. I have also noted some of the wider implications of this interpretation for contemporary work on moral deference and moral testimony, and for reading Zhu Xi, the Cheng brothers, and Neo-Confucianism more generally. It suggests that there is some interesting notion of proximity at work in explaining why some people can and others cannot appreciate the particular inferential force of particular reasons, and it suggests that there is a distinctive sort of philosophical problem—the problem of ensuring or guaranteeing the objectivity of our “appreciation” – that helps to justify some of their more ambitious metaphysical claims. Most importantly, we have in these later Confucian philosophers a rich, philosophical account of a phenomenon which plays a critical role in the acquisition of good ethical insight, a phenomenon that we all know by acquaintance but which few other philosophical traditions have explored in as much depth.⁴³

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