

The Moral Crisis in Post-Mao China: Prolegomenon to a Philosophical Analysis

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In the past decade or so a collective perception of a moral crisis has emerged and taken hold in China (Liu Zhifeng, 1999; Shao Daosheng, 1996; Wang Xiaoying, 2002). This collective perception is of something going amiss by the lights of members of Chinese society themselves rather than of anything within this society failing to conform to moral standards outside of it. There is thus a sense in which both the perception and the standards informing it are internal. When I speak of China's moral crisis in what follows, I do so in this internal sense, as a member of the society whose crisis it is.

In this essay I attempt to lay the groundwork for a philosophical analysis of this moral crisis. Since this analysis is of a crisis, it is naturally critical of those things that are identified as contributing to the crisis. In the face of a crisis there is no avoiding the need for critique. But such critique, aimed at understanding the crisis as a precondition of overcoming it, is distinct from moralistic condemnation, the mere passing of negative judgement. I stand not on moral high ground but on the ground of the crisis itself.

I first explain why it is appropriate to speak of a moral crisis and then examine the nature of the crisis. This examination is partly conceptual and partly causal. In the conceptual part, I discuss terms frequently used in reference to the crisis and introduce some analytical terms and distinctions of my own for further clarity. Then in the causal part, I trace the moral crisis to a crisis of identification with moral authority and exemplars, the latter crisis in turn containing important clues to the structure of self and agency in Chinese moral culture.

Is it not true, a skeptic might ask at the outset, that every society has its share of moral problems, often serious and intractable? If so, why conceive of such problems in post-Mao China as amounting to a moral *crisis*? On what grounds can it plausibly be said that what China is going through in its moral domain has the proportions of a crisis?

I see four phenomena, among others, in view of which, especially when taken together, the perception of a moral crisis in post-Mao China strikes me as appropriate and unexaggerated. First, everyday norms of coexistence and cooperation – be they moral, legal or regulatory – are breached on an alarming scale. Second, every sector of society, including officialdom and the academic community, is implicated in a big way, with no single institution or profession able to maintain a semblance of moral respectability. Third, the norms that are violated by so many in every walk of life are very elementary ones indeed (*dixian lunli*, as they are called in Chinese), not ones that require altruistic acts or the adoption of perfectionist conceptions of the good. Violations of such elementary norms have resulted in all too many instances of dangerously unsafe food, medicine, water, traffic, not to mention coalmines, in many ways the most visible epitome of what has gone wrong and how difficult it is to fix it. Fourth, and finally, this state of affairs has become increasingly normal. Watch programs like *Jiaodian fangtan*, *Zhongguo fazhi baodao* and *Daode guancha* on CCTV, *Shehui nengjiandu* on Phoenix TV, or read newspapers such as *Beijing qingnianbao* and *Nanfang zhoumo*, to name just a few, and it would be hard to resist the conclusion that norm-breaching behaviors one has every reason to wish were rare exceptions have come dangerously close to forming part of the order of the day. Even as official media report all kinds of blatantly unacceptable behavior with a view to stopping or reducing them, they turn such reporting, willy-nilly, into an entertainment of sorts or at best produce a kind of routinized exposure, a way for society to confront and digest the moral crisis through the enactment and channeling of outrage without providing real solutions. With this kind of normalization, the *sense* of moral crisis has diminished and may diminish even further. Yet upon reflection this is cause for a deeper sense of crisis.

Now, the notion of elementary norms to which I have appealed requires clarification. It is necessary to distinguish between norms of right (or justice) that govern relations among members of society, on the one hand, and standards of the good life that inform individual or collective choice of ends, on the other. By elementary norms I mean the former, and thus the moral crisis in post-Mao China that I am talking about is, in the first instance, a crisis involving the right (or justice) rather than the good. In other words, by moral crisis I refer to a state of affairs in which large numbers of people fail to comply with more or less acceptable rules of social co-existence and cooperation rather than a state of affairs in which large numbers of people pursue legally and morally permissible but arguably less than admirable conceptions of the good. Given this notion of a moral crisis, it is not surprising that the moral crisis in post-Mao China is at the same time a crisis of social order.

It is worth noting that the distinction between the right and the good is not one that informs the basic structure of Chinese moral culture. I say this for three reasons. First, the list of things which members of Chinese society are routinely enjoined to do or to refrain from doing is a mixed bag of (what could be distinguished as) commendable/non-commendable conceptions of the good and just/unjust courses of action. Second, the motivation to choose just courses of action and avoid unjust courses of action (insofar as such courses of action are distinguishable from those pertaining to the good) is explicitly based on subscription to an overarching conception of the good couched in teleological terms of socialism and communism. Third,

the process of striving to realize this overarching conception of the good is in turn meant to be presided over exclusively and to the very end by the Communist Party, and in this sense morality in China is explicitly contiguous with politics.

Strictly speaking, then, there is no structural distinction between the right and the good in Chinese moral culture, or between morality and politics. This fact is important: it yields a sense in which China's moral crisis is a crisis of the whole, that is, a crisis that does not admit of straightforward compartmentalization in the way, say, that a moral crisis in a modern Western society might.

This need not prevent us, however, from drawing a second-order, analytical distinction between the right and the good, or between politics and morality, with a view to clarifying the distinct locus of China's moral crisis and even its distinct causal story. Having claimed that the locus of China's moral crisis is in the first instance the domain of right, I want to add, as a hypothesis about its causal story, that this crisis has its origin in a crisis of the good, that is, a crisis of the socialist-communist conception of the good (Ci Jiwei, 1994). I would indeed suggest that the heavy dependence of the right on the good, or of morality on politics, to the point of allowing little room for these distinctions at the first-order level, is itself a structural root cause of China's current moral crisis.

Given the causal hypothesis just put forward, why do I not speak of a crisis of the good, in the first instance, and then say that this crisis of the good has given rise to a crisis of justice? This is because a crisis of the good in and of itself does not give us sufficient reason to get so worked up about the state of moral affairs in post-Mao China and describe it in such alarming terms as a moral crisis. No modern, pluralistic society is ever free of a crisis of the good in the eyes of a significant number of its members. By putting the crisis of justice at the front end of China's moral crisis, I mean to differentiate China's moral crisis from a lesser, self-contained crisis of the good – self-contained in the sense of leaving justice and order more or less intact. It is for this reason that I say that China's moral crisis is *in the first instance* a crisis of justice.

I hasten to add that it is such *only* in the first instance. As soon as we look at the causal picture, it is important to see, as I have suggested, that the crisis of justice in China is of a kind that is largely caused by a crisis of the good. Not only does this causal story give a distinctive character to China's crisis of justice, it also reveals as special China's crisis of the good, for the latter is of a kind that has a built-in tendency to cause a crisis of justice.

We do not actually hear of a crisis of the good in popular discourse about China's moral crisis: 'crisis of the good' belongs to the analytical vocabulary that I have adopted to make sense of the moral crisis, not to everyday discourse. What we come across in everyday discourse instead are references to a 'crisis of the spirit' (*jingshen weiji*) or a 'crisis of belief' (*xinyang weiji*). These terms lack sharpness, to be sure, and yet they point, if only vaguely, to something that suffuses the more mundane problems of justice and order. We can thus usefully retain these terms by making their referent more specific and precise, that is, by understanding them as representing different ways of trying to capture what I have been calling the crisis of the good. A crisis of the spirit or of belief occurs when the good that forms the substance of the spirit or belief loses its power to convince and inspire. In the case of post-Mao China, such a crisis is, as I have already noted with respect to the good, more than a crisis

involving the spirit or belief, for it leads directly to a crisis of justice and order. This says something about the internal, causal structure of Chinese moral culture, making what we should mean by crisis of the spirit and crisis of belief in the Chinese context very different from what we should mean by superficially similar terms in, say, the context of a modern Western society.

Having looked into the relation between the crisis of justice and the crisis of the good within China's overall moral crisis, I now want to return to the former for further elaboration. For there is yet another reason for which I want to treat China's moral crisis as, in the first instance, a crisis of justice and order that is conceptually distinct from a crisis of the good. Once a crisis of justice and order is underway, whatever its causes, it has a tendency to sustain and even aggravate itself. This is because non-compliance with norms of justice by some members of society, unless corrected in an effective and timely fashion, tends to weaken the desire for compliance on the part of others, thus leading to progressively worse overall non-compliance. This simple logic has clearly been set in motion in post-Mao China: very large numbers of people who otherwise would be perfectly willing to abide by elementary norms of justice have lost that willingness to one degree or another because so many other people, themselves perfectly willing at one time, have done so, violating norms with impunity and gaining unfair advantage. In this way, the perception that society is seriously lacking in predictable compliance with norms of justice, without the prospect of significant improvement in the foreseeable future, breeds more and more non-compliance until much of society is enveloped in an atmosphere of mistrust and resentment and sheer ill temper. This kind of atmosphere does not depend on the majority of people being guilty of non-compliance; it only requires a certain critical mass, which has no doubt been reached in China.

When I say that injustice unstopped or unpunished breeds more injustice, I need to be more specific about the nature of the injustice involved. Does the injustice I have in mind result from the implementation of norms that are themselves seriously flawed or from the failure of large numbers of people to comply with more or less acceptable norms? It is for the most part the second scenario, I believe, that is characteristic of the moral crisis in post-Mao China.

One example of the first scenario is the enforcement of the laws and regulations that make up the city/countryside divide, another the dismantling of the old socialist system of virtually universal, albeit very basic, health care.¹ In both of these cases, highly questionable norms are effectively put into practice. There is no shortage of unjust norms like these and the effective implementation of any of them is a source of injustice. This kind of scenario, highly problematic as it is, is not what I chiefly mean, however, when I speak of China's moral crisis.

Most of the injustices that make up what I am calling the crisis of justice belong rather to the second scenario. The norms breached by so many with such cumulatively disturbing consequences are for the most part not objects of moral disagreement. The crisis of justice consists instead in the routine violation of norms by people who do not object to the norms themselves and who definitely do not violate the norms *because* they object to them.

Why do so many people fail to comply with norms to which they take no exception as norms? A large part of the answer, as I have already suggested, is that too

many other people did the same, and this in turn because yet too many other people had done the same, in a vicious circle. There is nothing surprising about this phenomenon, for the disposition to be just is a conditional disposition. Such a disposition is marked by the willingness to comply with norms, as laid down in a given conception of justice, on condition that other members of society do the same. Each act in keeping with a norm is not only an instance of compliance but also an instance of reciprocation (Ci Jiwei, 2006: 1–2, 13–25). There are thus two necessary conditions (among others, as we shall see) for a just person's willingness to follow a norm: first that the norm is regarded as reasonably just, and second that most people comply with it most of the time. When the first condition (call it *the validity condition*) is seriously unsatisfied, the typical reaction informed by a sense of justice ranges from moral outrage through attempts at reform to civil disobedience or even revolt. When the second condition (call it *the reciprocity condition*) is seriously unsatisfied, what happens, in keeping with the conditional nature of the disposition to be just, is the gradual erosion of the willingness to comply with norms that are themselves regarded as largely unproblematic.

What we are witnessing in post-Mao China is a serious failure to satisfy the second condition and thus China's crisis of justice is essentially a breakdown of reciprocity. As such, the crisis manifests itself in a widespread lack of trust both in other members of society to comply with basic norms of social coexistence and cooperation and in the ability of the state to enforce compliance with such norms where enforcement is appropriate. The presence of so many free riders who routinely get away with it exacts too high a material and psychological cost on others, and not surprisingly, people of ordinary moral caliber who otherwise would be quite willing to follow basic norms of justice gradually shed that willingness in the absence of secure expectation of reciprocation from other members of society.

We have seen that the validity condition is not a sufficient condition of willingness to comply with norms. Such willingness requires further support in the shape of one or more other necessary conditions. One such further condition is the reciprocity condition just considered. There is yet another condition, one that has played an even bigger part in China's moral crisis. This condition has two components. The first – call it *the authority condition* – is the ungrudging acceptance of the authority that stands behind norms. This condition, though by no means unique to communist China, nevertheless figures with special prominence in it, in that the Party-Government is the only institutional initiator and authorizer of moral norms, not just legal norms. The second component, of equal importance in the Chinese context, involves the role of exemplars and the general perception that those who are supposed to be exemplars are living up to this role. Call this *the exemplar condition*. This condition, though conceptually distinct, is substantively continuous with the authority condition in communist China, in that those who make up the authority behind the norms, that is, the Party-Government as embodied in its officials at various levels, are the same people who must play the role of exemplars in acting on the norms.

The authority condition and the exemplar condition have in common that they explicitly place an institutional intermediary between norms and ordinary moral agents. For this reason, I think of these two conditions as components of one larger condition, which may be called *the identification condition*. It is through identification

with moral authority and moral exemplars that ordinary moral agents, in a moral culture like China's, acquire an understanding of norms and the motivation to act in accordance with them. What is important in the notion of identification here is that ordinary moral agents' access to norms is understood as necessarily mediated by the relation in which they stand to moral authority and moral exemplars. This relation has gone awry in post-Mao China, and we can see the resultant crisis of identification in its two component crises – a crisis of authority and a crisis of exemplification.

It is not difficult to infer a crisis of authority from the fact that the Party-Government, the sole institutional source of moral norms, actively engages in various forms of moral exhortation, and yet there is no shortage of people who act in disregard of such exhortation. Given the crucial role of political authority in Chinese moral culture, the high incidence of norm-violating behavior tells a special story.

Nor is it difficult to detect a crisis of exemplification in a lack of exemplars who command public credence. This is one of the gravest consequences of widespread official corruption and public knowledge of it. Corruption – by no means necessarily present everywhere in Chinese officialdom and yet well in excess of a minimal critical mass tending to cause alarm – looms large in the public perception of officials, and because the reliance on exemplars remains largely unchanged in Chinese moral culture and public officials are exemplars par excellence, the effect of this perception is one of rampant negative exemplification. Official corruption is imitated, as it were, in countless ways by people who are not in a position to practice corruption but who nevertheless follow the example of corrupt officials in throwing moral scruples and fear of sanctions to the wind.

From this fact something of fundamental importance about Chinese communist moral culture can be extrapolated, namely, that in this moral culture the moral self is formed on the basis of identification. Ultimately, a moral crisis is a crisis of the moral self, a crisis of moral willingness or moral agency. Where such willingness is undermined by a crisis of identification, it can be inferred that the very formation of the moral self in question rests upon what I have called the identification condition, comprising the authority condition and the exemplar condition. I cannot go into detail here, however, about how the Chinese moral self is formed on the basis of identification, as this is a complex subject requiring very extensive discussion. Nor is reliance on identification – on moral authority and moral exemplification – the only mechanism that is constitutive of the self in Chinese moral culture.

Whatever social or psychological mechanisms are involved in the formation of a moral self, they must somehow produce that element of willingness which defines a *moral* self. It is this element of willingness characteristic of a moral self that makes a crisis otherwise involving mere behavior a moral crisis. A moral crisis is a crisis of willingness to act in conformity with moral (including legal) norms for moral reasons. As such, a moral crisis is distinct from a pure crisis of enforcement of norms and calls for a distinct kind of explanation. Indeed, some significant degree of moral willingness is constitutive of strictly moral behavior and therefore is constitutive of the very possibility of a moral crisis. I have hypothesized that the social production of this moral willingness in Chinese communist moral culture depends on a distinctive mechanism of identification. This hypothesis needs elaboration and testing, and, as I have said, other mechanisms may play a part as well. At the core of this effort to

make sense of China's moral crisis is the idea that moral willingness must be produced somehow, or else there would be no moral self, moral behavior or moral crisis to speak of.

Not surprisingly, Chinese moral vocabulary contains an apt term for this willingness: *zijue*. *Zi* means the self, and *jue* the sort of awareness and motivation that is part and parcel of being a moral self or agent. The moral crisis we are talking about is nothing but a crisis of *zijue* thus understood. To get to the bottom of China's moral crisis, therefore, we must give an in-depth account of the structure of the Chinese moral self, that is, an account of the kind of *zijue* that is now in crisis. It has been my aim in this 'prolegomenon' to set the stage for such an account, which I see as the centerpiece of a full-fledged philosophical analysis of China's moral crisis.

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Note

1. There has been a public outcry against the latter and something is being done about it.

References

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