Li Yong: *Moral Partiality*

*Reviewed by Yves VENDÉ**

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Li Yong completed his PhD in 2012 at Saint Louis University under the supervision of Eleonore Stump. After graduation, he joined the School of Philosophy at Wuhan University. Several of his articles explore issues related to virtue ethics, engaging with Confucian and Western philosophical traditions. The book under review builds on his earlier publications—two chapters are revised versions of articles published between 2012 and 2022—and articulates his views on moral partiality within a broader framework. Li Yong's central project in *Moral Partiality* is twofold. On the one hand, he argues that partiality is "morally praiseworthy", while on the other he interprets Confucius, as depicted in the *Analects*, as a partialist. He begins the introduction with several illustrative stories highlighting conflicts in values with regard to prioritizing familial bonds versus the impartial justice expected in public or social responsibilities. One of these stories is the well-known account of a son helping his father to evade justice for stealing a sheep (*Analects* 13.18), which exemplifies the tension between filial piety and virtuous conduct. Contemporary tensions between the value systems of Confucianism and Communism also illustrate this.

The introduction allows Li Yong to define key terms and engage with several interlocutors. The first one is Ellen Maccarone, whose framework helps to clarify impartiality through four traits: (1) no irrelevancies (Mill), (2) no particularities (Rawls), (3) no special pleading, and (4) equal consideration of all parties involved. Each of these conceptions of "impartiality" presupposes the existence of an ideal observer who sets aside personal prejudices and interests when evaluating moral situations. Of course, there is a difference between holding a public office and having personal obligations. While impartiality may be expected in public roles, it does not invalidate the relevance of partial relationships. To illustrate this point, Li Yong draws on a Mencian example (*Mencius* 2A6): "In a situation where a mother has to decide to save her own child or a neighbor's child drowning in a swimming pool, it may be wrong to require her

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to be disinterested" (p. 5). This raises the following question: Is private life morally irrelevant?

According to Li Yong, the promotion of impartiality began in ancient Greek philosophy, notably with Plato's *Republic*, where citizens were expected to give complete allegiance to the city, which determines the good. Later, for utilitarians such as Mill, the calculation of overall happiness defined the good, whereas for Kant it was governed by adherence to a universal law. Contemporary thinkers concerned with impartiality, such as Brian Barry, distinguish between impartial principles (i.e., rationally agreed-upon principles) and impartial motivations (i.e., those not influenced by private considerations), which are necessary for promoting societal equity. However, Li Yong critiques these views for their reliance on utopian demands. They tend to blur the distinction between charity and duty. They fail because human identity is shaped by relationships (could a father be a father without feelings for his children?), particularly those to which individuals devote significant time and energy. Neglecting these relationships leads to emotional disturbance (p. 9).

Among those works Li Yong draws on is Brian Feltham and John Cottingham's edited volume, *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World*, which explores recent developments in the debate between impartiality and partiality. In this collection, Brad Hooker reflects on the application and communication of moral rules within communities, while Gerald Gauss contends that impartial reason reveals the true nature of morality. John Cottingham—frequently cited by Li Yong—argues that partiality is indispensable to individual life: one must care for oneself, a task that cannot be done for others. With the contributions of Maximilian de Gaynesford and Samuel Scheffler, the focus shifts from principles and values to the centrality of relationships. The first-person perspective should neither dominate nor be ignored, and there is a distinction between "bad partiality" (bias and prejudices) and "good partiality" (particular affections). Relationships are among the most fundamental human values, and moral reasoning is inherently relational. Sarah Stroud adds to this discourse by exploring the distinction between permissible and obligatory partiality. Stephen Darwall further asserts that personal relationships introduce a second-person authority into moral dynamics. Consequently, blind universalist formulations of ethical demands should be challenged.

Niko Kolodny—whose ideas are further discussed in chapter six—distinguishes between reactive emotions (dependent on the person, e.g., parents) and non-reactive emotions (natural, unrelated to the object or person). Kolodny believes that the principle of resonance explains why we have partial emotions toward

those we care about but not toward those we do not (p. 14). However, as Li Yong observes, Kolodny's concept of resonance has limitations: it does not establish a causal relationship between partial emotions and partial treatment. For example, caring for my dog does not imply that others will—or should—care for it. This issue reflects a broader indeterminacy in the concept of resonance.

Li Yong concludes his introduction by discussing the challenge of balancing unconstrained beneficence with strictly constrained beneficence (as discussed by Michael Ridge and David Estlund): How can we find a balance between private and public projects when allocating resources?

The second chapter addresses criticism of partial morality from a Confucian perspective, focusing on balancing partial and impartial demands. Li Yong first presents the story of the son, the father and the stolen sheep, as well as its various interpretations: (1) For Confucius, the virtuous person understands that the actions of the son and/or father are wrong but believes that turning the father in to the authorities would cause more harm than not doing so. By preserving the quality of the relationship, one maintains the possibility of reforming the individual (Bai Tongdong). (2) There is a valid reason for taking the sheep, making the morality of the action indeterminate. However, there is no textual evidence to support this interpretation. (3) What the father or son does is wrong, and turning them in to the authorities would be the correct course of action. However, the son does not take this step because family bonds are considered more important than public interest. Like the second interpretation, this one is problematic because it justifies immoral behaviour

Li Yong then concentrates on the first interpretation, where the issue with covering for the father lies in its consistency with a sense of justice understood as egalitarian impartiality. In Confucian virtue ethics, *xiao* (filial piety) is within the family, while *ren* (benevolence/humanity) pertains to the public sphere. The tree analogy, with roots (*xiao*) and branches (*ren*), is employed by several interpreters (Wang Yangming, Brian Van Norden) to justify the Confucian perspective: "Family relationships are the most important relationships for Confucians because family is the root of a person's development" (p. 24). The moral person is shaped not only by learning but also by the practice of *xiao*. *Xiao* involves serving one's parents according to rituals and caring for them with emotional attachment and respect (*Mencius* 4B30). However, the roots/branches metaphor can be understood in two different ways: (1) There is a distinction between moral feelings, which have their sprouts in our nature (as per *Mencius*), and moral practices developed through family life. Here, *xiao* is a means to develop *ren*, but other contexts might also facilitate moral practice. Once *ren* is established, *xiao* may no longer be necessary.

(2) If family is an essential principle of moral feelings and practice, *ren* cannot be separated from *xiao*. As a root, *xiao* needs to remain after the branches grow out. If we adopt the first interpretation, the son covers for his father because he has not yet fully cultivated a love for others and still needs to rely on filial piety to grow. If we adopt the second interpretation, we could argue that without filial piety, loving others is impossible. Against Qingping Liu, Li Yong argues that this metaphor fails to justify partiality because it complicates the balance between moral principles in decision-making, especially in extreme cases, such as when one's father is a moral monster. Another flawed argument considers the family as a whole, suggesting that it takes priority over society (Ruiping Fan). This view is based on a false premise, because by considering the family as a whole—rather than as composed of individuals—it overlooks the importance of relationships. Indeed, for Confucians, nurturing the capacity for relationships is crucial, which underpins his assertion that reporting the father is wrong for the son (while reporting the father itself is not wrong). Finally, as liberal Confucians like Steven Angle have highlighted, while filial piety is an essential principle of human life, it is not necessarily the only one. Moral principles should not be antagonistic:

> Thus, family love and love for others should both be realized in a way that honors their distinctive values. In the covering case, this group of Confucian scholars claims that the son should cover for the father, but he also needs to reimburse the owner of the sheep in a way that does not compromise the covering for the father. (p. 30)

Li Yong then differentiates here between two senses of familial partiality: a weak sense (treating family with more resources), which is addressed in chapter 3, and a strong sense (always prioritizing family over a principle of justice), which is discussed in chapter 5. Between these two chapters, Li Yong discusses the connection between familial partiality, evolution, and human nature. I will review these chapters in order, below.

In chapter three, Li Yong examines evolutionary arguments for partiality, concentrating on the attachment argument, the Darwinian natural rights argument, and the Aristotelian function argument. The first argument suggests that the "evolutionary theory of kin selection and moral emotion explains our special attachment to our family and that the special attachment to our family justifies our familial partiality" (p. 40). This perspective is supported by Confucians, who emphasize the significance of moral emotions in judgments (e.g., Donald J. Munro and Ryan Nichols). The underlying idea is that any common traits among human beings must result from evolution. However, Li Yong identifies a limitation to this, as how do we determine that morally good traits are instilled by evolution,

especially since violence is also a product and driving force of this process? According to Munro, evolutionary theory explains that kin selection and moral emotions account for attachment to family, which then justifies familial partiality. Li Yong notes that disagreements about partiality stem from the debate on how much special care we should provide our families.

Building on the works of Edward Slingerland and Evan Thompson, Li Yong claims that love or sympathy does not necessarily originate from the family: "The cultivation of [sympathy] involves inter-subjective interaction, which may or may not require the presence of family" (p. 50). This offers a causal and psychological explanation but does not establish a normative connection. Some naturalists (Larry Arnhart and William Casebeer) attempt to make this connection by using the concept of human function in the evolutionary process. Li Yong then examines this argument and concludes it falls short of supporting why "we ought to be partial to our family", as it only supports a weak claim of familial partiality. The strong claim is only examined in chapter 5, which first requires a deeper investigation into the evolutionary explanation of familial partiality in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 discusses Ryan Nichols' view that the evolutionary argument only supports a weak claim. Nichols asserts that early Confucianism "converted biological and evolutionary norms into social and moral norms" (p. 65). In this context, Li Yong reminds us that explaining a phenomenon is not equivalent to justifying its normativity. There is a distinction between claiming that a biological feature helps an organism survive and claiming that it is inherently good for the organism and species, as it has not been proven that evolution always selects the morally good option. Additionally, there is a difference between genetic inheritance and morphological adaptation to the environment. Another issue is distinguishing between biological and non-biological features, such as filial piety:

> it is wild to believe that there is genetic basis for any non-biological features, such as cellphone use. Thus, non-biological features are not relevant for the discussion on evolutionary explanations. […] It seems also improbable to discuss genetic inheritance of filial love. We would not believe that a person with filial love would pass this particular emotional reaction to her children through genes. (p. 65)

Despite the attempts by several Confucians to use evolutionary theory to justify moral partiality, the case for it remains unconvincing.

When we reach a dead end in philosophy, we need to change our perspective on the problem. Li Yong does this in chapter 5, where he draws on feminist and care ethics. Some feminists argue that, historically, women have been the

primary caregivers for children, and that women do not operate based on theoretical principles, but instead act out of a practical necessity to care for those in need. According to Sara Ruddick, in families becoming a mother would imply to "take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life" (p. 81). According to this account, mothers develop concrete abilities, such as relishing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and multiplying options rather than merely accepting the terms of a problem. However, as Li Yong observes, several objections should be raised here: (1) it is highly questionable as to whether there is a gender difference in moral issues and the strict division of parenting roles between men and women, and (2) mothering and giving birth are two distinct practices.

Another group of feminist philosophers (Virginia Held, Nel Noddings, and Ruth Groenhout) considers care ethics an alternative to utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. It has four key features: (1) a strong sense of responsibility for the other, distinguishing between the cared-for (face-to-face interactions) and the cared-about (expressed through financial support). This introduces circles of care (Noddings), suggesting caring for those close to us is normative, as it is instrumental in sustaining relationships with them. (2) Emotions play a crucial role and are considered in evaluating situations: "Emotions can better ascertain what morality recommends than reason does. I do not need to deliberate whether I should take care of my parents when they are old. It is a natural and emotional reaction for me to take care of them" (p. 86). (3) Care ethics is sceptical of universal principles and impartial, abstract rules. (4) It challenges the distinction between private and public spheres: "Care theorists […] point out that various powers of men have structured the family to the disadvantage of women and children. Women and mothering practices are confined to the private domain" (p. 87).

This last perspective empowers women and reminds us that moral agents are not idealized individuals free from relational influences. On the contrary, living morally should not contradict our nature and daily life, where we inherently think relationally: "We are interconnected with family and friends. We do depend on others to survive and have a sustainable life. If living a moral life means that those factors are not relevant, then a moral life is far from a real life, which would not help us to live in a real life" (p. 88). Caring impartially is simply impractical. In that sense, partiality can also be understood as having a place in moral issues. This approach is akin to the idea of successive circles of care in Confucianism, where partial morality contributes to personal relationships. But then, how do we reconcile the tension between partiality and justice?

Care theorists argue that care is more fundamental, thereby resolving the dilemma:

> Since each human being is a composition and embodiment of different social relations, the relations that define one's identity, such as familial relations and friendship, are more significant than other relations. In order to maintain those significant relations, one ought to distribute more resources and have more care towards those close ones. (p. 95)

The Confucian case, which presents a fundamental dilemma between care and justice, is thus resolved: justice evolves from care: "Maintaining good caring relations is also essential for having a just society in the long term. If everyone is cared for and everyone cares for others, then we would not have a broken and unjust society" (p. 96). Li Yong then presents a limitation of the care approach: care entails distributive injustice as it functions through successive concentric circles.

In chapter 6, on love and partiality, Li Yong builds on the care theorist approach to emphasize the normative nature of personal relationships. Love can be understood as a passion, an impulse, or as valuing the relationship with the beloved. Li Yong presents Aquinas' concept of love and connects it with Confucian virtues. This notion of love "requires two interconnected desires: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved and (2) the desire for union with the beloved" (p. 103). Goodness here has a broad meaning—it is not only moral but can also be aesthetic. The notion of "second-personal experience" is then central:

> Shared attention can be understood as both persons having a second-personal experience of each other. If a student also has a direct and immediate interaction with the teacher when she lectures, then they would have shared attention. Shared attention requires both people to engage with each other in a direct and immediate manner. (p. 104)

Real love entails a sense of closeness and the presence of the beloved. This interpretation of love aligns with Confucian virtues such as *Xiao* and *Ren*, as they represent the desire for the beloved's well-being: "I believe that for Confucius, love is the desire for the objective goodness of the beloved. Being virtuous is part of the objective goodness. Furthermore, Confucius tends to deny the benefit of the material good" (p. 106). As Guo Qigong argues, Confucian love cannot be reduced to understanding goodness as merely material wealth. When considering Fan Chi's question about *ren* (*Analects* 12.22), love within a Confucian context can be understood as showing compassion and closeness: *xiao* regarding parents, and *ren* when it extends beyond the family.

However, love is not expressed in the same way in all relationships, as love for one's parents differs from love for one's spouse. Similarly, love for a person is distinct from loving objects (or wealth), status, and roles. An office of love, what defines the relationship, is a culturally acknowledged role in another person's life—being someone's grandparent, parent, spouse, sibling, child, friend, etc. Li Yong then demonstrates that some offices of love are reasonable while others are not. In other words, can partial love be considered responsive to reason?

> It might be that emotions are the result of adaption in the process of evolution. They are instrumental to facilitate our social interactions and help us to survive. […] Furthermore, if there is a normative reason to survive and evolve, then as a means to the end of survival and evolution, there is a normative reason to have partial emotions. (p. 114)

If we desire the good of a beloved person, not all choices are conducive to becoming a fully developed human being: deciding on a job is not the same as choosing to become an alcoholic, since the former has a different intrinsic value, and is neither agent-neutrally good nor agent-relatively good.

Li Yong concludes this chapter by arguing that experiencing intimacy and emotional connection is necessary to be fully human, that such relationships are not limited to family bonds, and are impossible for many people: shared attention is limited by its nature (Stanley Milgram). Regarding the case of the son helping his sheep-stealing father, Li Yong notes that

> if the son loves his father, the son desires the good of his father and union with his father. If the father is a moral monster, a rapist, or a serial killer, it seems that covering for him is not good for him. Moral reform may require certain legal punishment for him or his public confession. However, for the covering case, all my discussion is based on the reading that turning the father in to the authorities is not the right way to reform him and that covering is good for him. (p. 119)

Ultimately, Li Yong presents a systematic development that advocates for reasonable moral partiality. He clearly defines the scope of his reflection, notably by avoiding Daoist resources on this topic, which aligns with his self-identification as a Confucian. Li Yong takes each objection or counterargument seriously and addresses them honestly. His reminder that explaining and describing a phenomenon is not the same as justifying it is crucial. For example, in chapter 3 he convincingly demonstrates the epistemic possibility of deriving "morality ought claims" from factual premises. As one might expect, Li Yong also relies heavily

on Aristotelian and analytical vocabulary. From this perspective, an approach rooted in historical or intellectual history would complement his analysis. Indeed, the systematic mutual engagement of Confucianism and Aristotelianism regarding virtues began as early as François Noël's treatise the *Philosophia Sinica*, published in 1711 in Prague.

Finally, and as is customary in such reviews, I would like to suggest two possible directions for further developments based on Li Yong's current book.

Firstly, the understanding of social roles cannot be decoupled from the context in which they exist. The expressions of manhood and womanhood encompass different spectrums of roles depending on the culture and time. Therefore, the research of several scholars who have explored the role of gender in Confucianism—such as Robin Wang, Lin Ma, Lisa Rosenlee, and Lisa A. Raphals—could complement feminist critiques on motherhood and care ethics concerning the relationship between emotional attachment and expected social roles.

Secondly, it is worth noting that Li Yong's interpretation of Plato relies mainly on *The Republic* and *The Laws*. However, regarding the issue of filial piety, much of the Western tradition draws from the *Euthyphro* and its medieval commentaries. Expanding on this could provide a more comprehensive engagement with the subject in the Western tradition (which is not solely analytical).

These two remarks do not diminish the interest or importance of Li Yong's book, especially chapter 6, which opens a creative pathway for reflection on virtue ethics—a direction I hope the author will continue to explore. Overall, this book will be valuable for graduate students interested in comparative virtue ethics, and researchers engaged in moral partiality research.