Ancient Chinese Mirrors:

Reflections of Life

Mirrors, Minds, and Metaphors

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As most scholars of classical Chinese philosophy are well aware, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi* both make use of the metaphor of the heart-mind (xin) as a mirror. For Zhuangzi, a heart-mind like a mirror constitutes the ideal state of unity with the Way: "The sage's heart-mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things."[1](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f1) For Xunzi, one must have a heart-mind like a mirror in order to learn about the Way. Just as a pan of water can be "clear and pure enough to see your beard and eyebrows and to examine the lines on your face," so, too, can the heart-mind be clear and pure enough to respond appropriately to learning.[2](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f2) A number of scholars have discussed the significance of the mirror metaphor in these and other Chinese texts.[3](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f3) It may be of particular interest to comparative philosophers that the mirror metaphor is not confined to the Chinese tradition. Søren Kierkegaard is one example of a Western philosopher who used this metaphor, maintaining that the properly attuned heart "mirrors" the Good: "As the sea mirrors the elevation of heaven in its pure depths, so may the heart when it is calm and deeply transparent mirror the divine elevation of the Good in its pure depths."[4](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f4) Richard Rorty, too, makes use of the mirror metaphor in his work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, arguing that "The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, non-empirical methods."[5](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f5)

What should comparative philosophers learn from the shared use of metaphors across different cultural and philosophical traditions? In his recent work, Edward Slingerland suggests that the shared use of metaphors across different cultural, philosophical, and religious contexts points toward deeper similarities between what may at first appear to be contrasting views.[6](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f6) In this article, by comparing the mirror metaphor in Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Kierkegaard, and Rorty, I argue that a properly contextualized comparison of different uses of a metaphor sometimes uncovers more differences than similarities between philosophical views. I begin by discussing the uses of the mirror metaphor in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*. I then turn to the uses of the metaphor in the work of Kierkegaard and Rorty, focusing on what makes their understanding of the mirror metaphor distinctively Western, thereby marking a contrast to Chinese understandings. In the final part of this article I discuss Slingerland's suggestion that shared metaphors indicate deeper similarities between views, and I show how the foregoing comparative analysis constitutes a counterexample to his view. I aim to show that an analysis of different understandings of the same metaphor is one way of coming to appreciate features of cultural, philosophical, and religious views that might otherwise be overlooked, but that these features are **[End Page 337]** appreciated primarily as a result of the differences between the uses of the metaphor under study.

# *The Mirror Metaphor in the* Zhuangzi

Quite early in China's history, mirrors were seen as possessing great religious significance. Instead of passively reflecting the objects that came before them, mirrors were thought to respond to their environment in active and dynamic ways, evidencing a mysterious power. Some of the earliest recorded references to bronze mirrors (*jian*) are found in the Zuozhuan (Commentary of Zuo). The Zhouli and the Huainanzi both refer to the use of bronze mirrors and concave mirrors (*fu sui*or *yang sui*) in ceremonial practices.[7](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f7) Mirrors came to be seen as active, responsive objects because they could be used to produce fire and water. When placed outside, concave mirrors focused sunlight to produce fire, while bronze mirrors gathered condensation in the light of the moon. But it was not simply the fact that mirrors had the power to *gather* or *produce* that made them objects of religious significance in ancient China; it was *what* they produced. Water and fire were thought to be the pure essences of *yin* and *yang*, respectively, and the fact that mirrors appeared to draw these substances from the sun and moon reinforced the cosmological power that was already associated with them. Mirrors were seen as *responding* to their environment by collecting water and fire, which is why, as Philip J. Ivanhoe has noted, mirrors came to be seen as offering "the paradigm for *proper responsiveness*: they reflect the true essence of the ultimate *yin* and *yang*—the alpha and omega of phenomena in early Chinese cosmology."[8](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f8)

In his essay "A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Mind in the *Chuang Tzu*," Harold Oshima writes that because the ancient Chinese saw mirrors as symbolizing a powerful connection to the powers of the heavens, mirrors "would have served admirably as a model for the *xin* ["heart-mind"]. To be sure, the mirror metaphor for the *xin* appears quite pedestrian and unexciting until we realize that the mirror itself was imagined to possess broad and mysterious powers."[9](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f9) Oshima goes on to argue that the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror is the determinative model for a number of the *Zhuangzi*'s ideas about the *xin*. The graph for *xin*is based on an oracle bone pictograph of the human heart, and it is used to refer both to the physical organ in one's chest and to the seat of such faculties as thinking, perceiving, feeling, desiring, and intending. The earliest known uses of the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror are found in the *Zhuangzi*. In chapter 5 Zhuangzi refers to "mirroring" (*jian*) as an activity: "Persons do not mirror themselves in running water—they mirror themselves in still water."[10](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f10) In chapter 7 this activity is associated with perfected persons (*zhiren*): "Perfect Persons use their heart-minds like mirrors—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing."[11](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f11) Later, this metaphor is used to describe the sage (*shengren*).[12](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f12)

One of the first things to note about these passages is that the *Zhuangzi* uses the mirror metaphor at once to describe both stillness and activity. As the discussion preceding Zhuangzi's use of the metaphor in chapter 7 shows, the text describes certain **[End Page 338]** *kinds* of activities or responses to the world and contrasts them with those activities that are not in accord with the Way:

Do not be an embodier of fame; do not be a storehouse of schemes; do not be an undertaker of projects; do not be a proprieter of wisdom. Embody to the fullest what has no end and wander where there is no trail. Hold on to all that you have received from Heaven but do not think that you have gotten anything. Be tenuous, that is all. Perfect Persons use their heart-minds like mirrors—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Therefore they can win out over things and not hurt themselves.[13](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f13)

Perfected persons respond to the people or things that come before them, but the appropriate response does not include inciting, challenging, pursuing, or retaining things. This is why Zhuangzi says that perfected persons "go after nothing, welcome nothing" (*bu jiang bu ying*). Like mirrors, they do not pursue things, but they are responsive to things. Additionally, just as mirrors do not store or retain the images that pass before them, perfected persons do not retain or hold on to their previous activities or responses. They "respond without storing" (*ying er bu cang*), that is, they respond to each situation naturally, one at a time, without allowing the previous situation to interfere with the current one.

It is important to note that according to the mirror metaphor, it is the *xin* ("heart-mind") that responds in each situation. "Mirroring" is an ideal state in the *Zhuangzi*—the state that characterizes a sage. The *xin* is the appropriate way of describing the locus of this state because it is the seat of cognitive and affective capacities, as well as intentions and volitional powers. When perfected persons respond by moving in accord with the Way and in harmony with the cosmos, they do not *passively* reflect the Way. They illumine other things and respond with their cognitive, affective, intentional, and volitional powers all engaged properly. Here we should recall that for Zhuangzi none of these capacities is to be shut down or manipulated; rather, we must allow them to flow freely and spontaneously, unbound by the distinctions and categories that have been imposed on us by society:

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence. . . . Let it be! Let it be! [It is enough that] morning and evening we have them, and they are the means by which we live. Without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of.[14](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f14)

The ability to hold on to what one has received from Heaven and "respond without storing" constitutes a state of harmony with the Way. Here we can see how the Chinese understanding of mirrors as active, responsive objects informs the use of the metaphor in the *Zhuangzi*. Like mirrors, sages are the paradigm for proper responsiveness. When one's heart-mind is like a mirror, one spontaneously moves in harmony with the Way, "mirroring" Heaven and earth, and the ten thousand things.

In addition to responsiveness, mirrors carry the connotations of illumination in Chinese thought. The *Zhuangzi* tells us that the sage "illuminates (*zhao*) all in the light of Heaven. . . . So, I say, the best thing is to use clarity (*ming*)."[15](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f15) The text uses a cluster of terms to describe the ideal state, many of which are also used **[End Page 339]** to describe mirrors. The terms *zhao* ("illuminate," "reflect," "mirror") and *ming* ("bright," "clear") are two such examples, both carrying the sense of illumination. Mirrors in early China were thought to illumine or reveal objects that passed in front of them, just as sages were thought to have a profound effect on their surroundings.[16](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f16) In chapter 5 the mirror metaphor is used to emphasize this effect. After noting that people mirror themselves in still water and not running water, Zhuangzi says, "Only what is still can still the stillness of other things" (*wei zhi neng zhi zhong zhi*).[17](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f17) A mirror-like state of harmony with the Way allows sages to see things clearly and enables them to respond without prejudice or preference, but the proper response can only occur if the heart-mind is absolutely calm, like still water, which serves as a mirror.[18](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f18)

In addition to the qualities of responsiveness and illumination, Zhuangzi also emphasizes stillness. The image of still water (*zhi shui*) serving as a mirror emphasizes the character of the sage's heart-mind, which is undisturbed by emotions or external influences. The text contrasts running or flowing water (*liu shui*) with water that stands still, perfectly flat and calm. In chapter 13 the text offers another description of stillness, again employing the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror:

Water that is still (*jing*) gives back a clear (*ming*) image of beard and eyebrows; reposing in the water level, it offers a measure to the great carpenter. And if water in stillness possesses such clarity, how much more must pure spirit (*jing shen*)? The sage's heart-mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things.[19](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f19)

This passage places particular emphasis on the clarity of the images reflected in still water. Even the fine hairs of a person's beard and eyebrows can be viewed in such still water. This clarity serves as a metaphor for the clarity of the heart-mind, which, in its stillness (*jing*), is so clear (*ming*) that it is "the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of ten thousand things." Here we should recall that clarity is associated with mirrors, which "light up" or "illumine" what comes before them. The sage who mirrors Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things sees them clearly, illuminated brightly. Here we see that in addition to the other uses we have noted, mirrors in early China were also sometimes seen as reflecting back the truth about the world accurately.

By referring to the ten thousand things, this last line shows the extent to which the mirror metaphor in the *Zhuangzi* is about more than the state of a person's heart-mind; it concerns the nature of the world and its relation to human beings. When one moves in accord with the Way, the need for a sense of self apart from the ten thousand things recedes, and one comes to see oneself as but a small part of the larger patterns and processes of the world. In this way, sages come to appreciate things as they really are, and rely on their spontaneous, pre-reflective intuitions for guidance.[20](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f20) In chapter 13 the *Zhuangzi* calls this state "the perfection of *dao* and de" (*dao de zhi zhi*). Like a mirror, the heart-mind is responsive and illuminating, but it is also still and calm. Serving as the model of spontaneous movement **[End Page 340]** and unity with the Way, the heart-mind is the model of proper responsiveness in the same way that mirrors are the paradigm of proper responsiveness when they produce water and fire, *yin* and *yang*.

# The Mirror Metaphor in the Xunzi

Although the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi* present opposing visions of human nature and self-cultivation, the *Xunzi* is one of several texts that bear the mark of Zhuangzi's influence through the use of the mirror metaphor.[21](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f21) In fact, Xunzi's use of the metaphor bears striking resemblance to the passage we have examined from chapter 13 of the *Zhuangzi*. Both philosophers refer to the way in which still water can serve as a mirror, giving back a clear image of one's beard and eyebrows. But although this similarity might lead us to think that they use the mirror metaphor in the same way, Xunzi transforms Zhuangzi's metaphor, using it to express and shape his own position. In chapter 21 Xunzi prefaces his claim that the heart-mind is like a mirror with an important remark that serves as a guide to his use of the metaphor: "Only the junzi who has already become bright and clear (*ming*) is able to know the first hints of being anxiously on guard or of attentiveness to subtle manifestations."[22](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f22) For Xunzi, only those who have *already become ming* ("bright and clear") are able to come to know certain things about the Way. He goes on to say,

Hence, the human heart-mind may be compared to a pan of water. If you place the pan upright and do not stir the water up, the mud will sink to the bottom, and the water on top will be clear and pure (*qing ming*) enough to see your beard and eyebrows and to examine the lines on your face. But if a slight wind passes over its surface, the submerged mud will be stirred up from the bottom, and the clarity and purity of the water at the top will be disturbed so that it is impossible to obtain the correct impression of even the general outline of the face. Now, the heart-mind is just the same.[23](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f23)

Although Xunzi appeals to Zhuangzi's image of a person's beard and eyebrows, he develops the metaphor in a very different way. To begin with, Xunzi describes a reflection in a *pan* of water, unlike Zhuangzi, who contrasts still water with flowing water, apparently in natural settings—rivers, streams, ponds, or lakes. In addition, Xunzi introduces "muddiness" into the metaphor, focusing on the water's clarity or turbidity in addition to its stillness. For Xunzi, an undisturbed pan of water must be both still and clear in order for one to see an accurate reflection of oneself. He writes that the heart-mind is just the same.

Thus, if you lead it with rational principles (*li*), nurture it with purity (*qing*), and not allow mere things to "tilt" it, then it will be adequate to determine right and wrong and to resolve any doubtful points. But if small things pull at it so that its right relation with the external world is altered and the mind's inner workings are "tilted," then it will be inadequate to decide even gross patterns.[24](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f24)

Here again, we can see how Xunzi develops the metaphor in a distinctive way. He is concerned with the pan of water being tilted, which would disturb one's ability to view an accurate, undistorted reflection. In addition to disturbing the water's stillness, **[End Page 341]** Xunzi tells us that tilting the pan makes the water murky, which also distorts a reflection. All of this, he maintains, resembles the task of the sage, who must not allow his heart-mind to be tilted or disturbed, and who must work to avoid stirring it up with distractions. For Xunzi, the heart-mind's stillness and clarity is not a goal or end-in-itself, as it is for the Zhuangzian sage. Rather, a heart-mind that is bright and clear, like a mirror, is a necessary condition for learning about the Way. This aspect of Xunzi's metaphor marks a contrast to Zhuangzi, for whom a heart-mind like a mirror *constitutes* a state of unity with the Way. For Xunzi, the state of the water, like the state of the heart-mind, allows something else to be accomplished; the metaphor expresses an instrumental relationship. Just as a mirror is used for examining the whiskers and lines on one's face, a mind that is clear and free of distractions is used for learning about the Way. As Xunzi develops the metaphor on his own terms, the differences from Zhuangzi's use of the metaphor become apparent. We find no traces of the still heart-mind as *constitutive* of the sage's harmony with the Way, evidenced by his spontaneous responsiveness to the world. For Xunzi, a heart-mind like a mirror describes a state that is *preparatory for* learning about the Way.

It is worth noting that certain dimensions of Xunzi's use of the mirror metaphor resonate strongly with his larger program of self-cultivation and the collection of metaphors he uses to describe it. The introduction of a pan of water as opposed to natural occurrences of water is consistent with Xunzi's insistence that human nature is reformed from the outside in using the rites and traditions created by the sages over time.[25](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f25) To illustrate and develop his view of the way human dispositions and attitudes are shaped, he often uses craft metaphors.[26](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f26) Like the work of steaming and bending wood, or sharpening metal with a whetstone, water must be held still in a pan, where it is not at the mercy of the unpredictable forces of nature, such as wind and water currents. Rather, if someone holds the water perfectly still in a pan—a container that itself was fashioned by human hands—then it can be used as a mirror. Xunzi's description of the mud, and the way it can be stirred up with even the slightest tilt, reinforces his insistence on the attentiveness and self-consciousness required of those who follow the Way. Here we see a contrast with Zhuangzi, who does not discuss the care one must take to avoid stirring up the mud at the bottom. Zhuangzi's metaphor does not even include a pan of water with mud at the bottom—only the contrast between flowing water and still water.

This difference points to another important contrast that we have already mentioned: Xunzi seems to be more concerned with emphasizing clarity than Zhuangzi, who focuses more heavily on stillness. For Zhuangzi and the early Daoists more generally, getting in touch with one's spontaneous, pre-reflective intuitions means settling down and being at ease in the world. Zhuangzi's goal, then, is to make the heart-mind *still*. For Xunzi, settling down in the Zhuangzian sense could only perpetuate the unrefined state into which we are born. Xunzi thinks we need to work hard at being attentive in order to refine ourselves. The work that it takes to hold a pan of water perfectly straight without even the slightest tilt is another metaphor for his rigorous program of self-cultivation. Xunzi's goal is to make the mind *clear* so that it is ready to learn. **[End Page 342]**

Despite these differences from Zhuangzi, however, Xunzi's use of the mirror metaphor is still distinctively Chinese. One of the clearest indications of this fact is Xunzi's concern with the way that the heart-mind becomes preoccupied to the degree that it is unable to function properly in the moment: "if small things pull at it so that its right relation with the external world is altered and the mind's inner workings are 'tilted,' then it will be inadequate to decide even gross patterns."[27](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f27) As we have already seen, one of the things that helped to make mirrors the paradigm of proper responsiveness in ancient China was the fact that they did not retain their previous images. As David Nivison has pointed out, Xunzi is aware that the mind can become obsessed with the things it encounters, posing a danger that "can be met only by cultivating the mind's capacity to keep itself in order as it is functioning: to be open to new impressions no matter how 'full' it is, to keep its contents clear and distinct no matter how diverse they are, and to maintain a sense of reality no matter how free the constant movement of thought and imagination."[28](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f28) Here we can see the resemblance between the heart-mind and mirrors, as Zhuangzi does when he discusses "responding without storing."

However, for Xunzian sages, unlike Zhuangzian sages, the purpose of "mirroring" is to be receptive to learning about the Way. Nivison notes that Xunzi sees the state of the heart-mind as "a means to clear thinking and correct judgment, not a religious goal, not an end in itself."[29](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f29) Xunzi's instrumental view of the heart-mind represents a marked contrast with the *Zhuangzi*, where a "heart-mind like a mirror" is a sagely achievement. For Zhuangzi this state is not a means to an end. But, Xunzi tells us, "a muddied brightness (*zhuo ming*) casts an external shadow, and a pure brightness (*qing ming*) shows a reflection from within. The sage follows his desires and fulfills his emotions, but having regulated them, he accords with rational principles of order. . . . This is the way of putting the mind in order."[30](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f30) The calm, clear, and bright heart-mind is a state that *enables* individuals to put their minds "in order" and learn about the Way, like the water's surface, which, when calm, clear, and bright, *enables* one accurately to view his beard, eyebrows, and the lines on his face.

Xunzi says, "When water is moving and reflections waver, men do not use it to determine their beauty or ugliness."[31](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f31) Likewise, if the heart-mind is not still, one cannot use it to learn about the Way. Although Xunzi does not take the state of the "heart-mind like a mirror" to be an end in itself, he still maintains with Zhuangzi that it is responsive, as mirrors are responsive, and also that mirrors sometimes function to tell us the truth about the world. However, although the heart-mind is clear and calm like a reflective surface, it is not confined to passive reflection. It also responds actively, lighting up the things that pass before it.

# The Mirror Metaphor in Two Western Contexts

We now turn our attention from the classical Chinese tradition to the Western philosophical tradition, and to two very different philosophers who, like Xunzi and Zhuangzi, use the mirror metaphor to describe and develop certain features of their **[End Page 343]** views. In general in the Western tradition, the heart and mind have been used to refer to the different sources of affective and cognitive capacities, which indicates among other things that many Western thinkers have seen them as different *kinds* of capacities. The two philosophers discussed in this section reflect this division between the heart and the mind in their use of the mirror metaphor. While Kierkegaard describes the heart as a mirror, focusing primarily on affective and volitional capacities, Rorty describes the mind as a mirror, focusing strictly on Western epistemic concerns. Both philosophers speak quite intentionally of either the heart or the mind, depending upon their purposes, and this shows that, at least in some general sense, they share a cultural understanding of the heart and the mind. This understanding serves as a contrast to the Chinese view, according to which the *xin* ("heart-mind") is seen as the seat of all of the capacities that the Western tradition has tended to associate with either the heart or the mind. It will also become apparent in this section that Kierkegaard and Rorty share a cultural understanding of mirrors, and we will see that this understanding contrasts readily with the Chinese view.[32](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f32) In the non-pseudonymous work *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a calm sea, which functions like a mirror, reflecting the heavens, to describe his conception of the proper functioning of the human heart:

As the sea mirrors the elevation of heaven in its pure depths, so may the heart when it is calm and deeply transparent mirror the divine elevation of the Good in its pure depths. If the least thing comes in between, between the heavens and the sea, between the heart and the Good, then it would be sheer impatience to covet the reflection. For if the sea is impure it cannot give a pure reflection of the heavens.[33](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f33)

There are a couple of things that are especially noteworthy about Kierkegaard's use of the mirror metaphor in this passage. First, his primary concern is with *impurities* in the water. Kierkegaard's remarks focus on the various kinds of impurities that may prevent the water from giving back a "pure reflection." Now there are a variety of things that might cause impurities, and given his claim that the heart must be both calm and transparent, it seems safe to assume that when he discusses impurities Kierkegaard includes the causes of impurities—anything that stirs the water up or causes it to become cloudy, including wind or external agitations of any sort. He also mentions objects coming in between the heavens and the sea. If one is trying to view the reflection of the clouds overhead in calm water, and an airplane flies overhead, or a boat speeds across the water, the reflection will be interrupted by the object passing in between the water's surface and the clouds that are reflected therein.

According to Kierkegaard's use of the metaphor, if a person wishes to reflect the Good, she must avoid external influences that may interfere with her reflection of the Good, which for Kierkegaard means her connection with God. One must remain wholly focused on God, which means protecting oneself from the distractions and trappings of the world, which are especially tempting to the human will, which is necessarily corrupt because of original sin. For Kierkegaard, when individuals assert themselves against God, this constitutes sin, which involves acting against what humans are created to be: creatures dependent on God's love. At the same time, **[End Page 344]** Kierkegaard maintains that individuals are responsible for what they will. Self-awareness prompts awareness of human inadequacy and prepares individuals to accept God's help, which includes an awareness of one's complete dependence on God. When we eliminate our opposition to God's will, we surrender our own corrupt wills to God, which allows God's transforming power to work in our hearts.[34](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f34) Kierkegaard writes that "purity of heart is the very wisdom that is acquired through prayer. A man of prayer does not pore over learned books for he is the wise man 'whose eyes are opened'—when he kneels down (Numbers 24 : 16)."[35](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f35) The commitments of the heart are the commitments that are most central to one's identity—one's "innermost being," as he puts it.[36](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f36)

Kierkegaard maintains that when one's heart becomes clear and calm like a mirror it is almost inevitable that it will reflect the Good, as a clear, calm sea inevitably reflects the skies above. He says, "As the sea, when it lies calm and deeply transparent, yearns for heaven, so may the pure heart, when it is calm and deeply transparent, yearn for the Good."[37](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f37) He also notes the important role that one's volitions play in this process: "As the sea is made pure by yearning for heaven alone; so may the heart become pure by yearning only for the Good."[38](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f38) If one chooses to accept God's saving grace, one begins to cultivate certain desires and feelings, which constitutes a process of purification that is completed only when one yearns for the Good alone.[39](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f39)

This last point brings us to another feature of Kierkegaard's use of the metaphor that is especially noteworthy for the purposes of this study. Although he mentions that the heart must be calm, he also says it must be "deeply transparent" in order to mirror the Good. Transparency here gives us the sense of emptiness and passivity. When something serves as a mirror, it is not active or responsive.[40](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f40) Kierkegaard emphasizes the connection between purity and transparency: "Purity of heart: it is a figure of speech that compares the heart to the sea, and why just to this? Simply for the reason that the depth of the sea determines its purity, and its purity determines its transparency."[41](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f41) He writes that the sea is "pure only when it is deep, and is transparent only when it is pure[;] as soon as it is impure it is no longer deep but only surface water, and as soon as it is only surface water it is not transparent."[42](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f42) A heart must be "deeply and transparently pure[,] . . . all of one consistency," like the surface of a calm sea. Like a mirror, a calm sea passively reflects the heavens, and a calm, pure heart gives back a passive reflection of the Good.

There are both similarities and differences between Kierkegaard's understanding of what it means for the heart to be like a mirror and the understandings we have seen in Zhuangzi and Xunzi. As with Zhuangzi, the state Kierkegaard describes is an end in itself; it is constitutive of the individual's complete dedication to "the divine elevation of the Good." The metaphysical and religious dimensions of Zhuangzian and Kierkegaardian thought surface here. Kierkegaard tells us in *Purity of Heart* that morally good people can be identified by the fact that they "will one thing." This "one thing" is a commitment that is qualitatively different from all others, and, according to Kierkegaard, the only kind of commitment that can function in this manner is a commitment to the Good. When one is unconditionally committed to the Good, one's heart is pure. Kierkegaard offers his interpretation, quoting from **[End Page 345]** James 4 : 8: "'Purify your hearts, ye double-minded,' that is, purify your hearts of double-mindedness; in other words, let your heart in truth will only one thing, for therein is the heart's purity."[43](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f43)

Kierkegaard leaves little room to question that purity of heart is an end in itself largely because he contrasts the purity of heart attained by individuals who will the Good single-mindedly with "double-minded" individuals, who pursue the Good in order to receive a reward.[44](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f44) In contrast, when individuals will the Good, single-mindedly making a commitment to become the selves God calls them to be, they make a commitment to pursue the Good because it is the Good.[45](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f45) Kierkegaard writes that these individuals' hearts are "deeply transparent," like the water in a calm sea. It is not muddied or murky, and this is why a "pure reflection" of the Good is possible. Here we can see a point of resonance with Xunzi's discussion of how a pan of water must not be tilted, for if the water becomes turbid and muddied, it can no longer serve as a mirror. So, as with Xunzi, Kierkegaard's conception of a heart like a mirror requires one to avoid disturbance and impurity, but, as with Zhuangzi, Kierkegaard's ideal state constitutes an end in itself.

However, there is a set of penetrating differences between Kierkegaard's discussion of mirrors and reflections and the Zhuangzian and Xunzian uses of the mirror metaphor. Kierkegaard uses the mirror metaphor to describe how the pure heart is "calm and deeply transparent," and thus reflects the Good with complete accuracy. His use of the word "transparent" is especially important for our purposes, because the pure heart does not *respond* in addition to reflecting the truth, in the way that the heart-mind does for Zhuangzi and Xunzi. Although "willing one thing" is a response to God's call, the state that this response brings about—a heart like a mirror—is not responsive in character. The metaphor is appropriate, in Kierkegaard's view, because mirrors are not responsive.

Rorty shares Kierkegaard's conception of mirrors as passive reflectors of whatever passes before them, and the mirror metaphor occupies a central place in Rorty's work. However, unlike the other figures we have examined, Rorty argues for the rejection of the metaphor. He maintains that the history of Western philosophy is dominated by the metaphor of the mind as a mirror, defined by the idea that the mind reflects reality:

[M]etaphors rather than statements . . . determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, non-empirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself.[46](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f46)

Rorty's analysis concerns the use of the mirror metaphor in Western epistemology. He calls the mirror metaphor "the original sin of epistemology" in the Western philosophical tradition, because epistemology has concerned itself with the accuracy of the mind.[47](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f47) Rorty argues that Western epistemologists typically examine the mind, trying to figure out if it is reflecting reality with accuracy and clarity, like a mirror. He discusses the work of philosophers such as Descartes and Kant, who, he **[End Page 346]** argues, conceived of themselves as "getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror."[48](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f48)

Rorty tells us that there are three things involved in thinking of the mind as a mirror: the person, the object, and the inner representation of that object.[49](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f49) An agent's mind makes knowledge of an object possible by representing or reflecting the object back to her. Traditionally our chief task as philosophers, as Rorty puts it, has been to "mirror accurately, in our own Glassy Essence, the universe around us," which complements the assumption that the world itself is made up of clearly and distinctly knowable things.[50](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f50) Rorty concludes that "the professional philosopher's self-image depends upon his professional preoccupation with the image of the Mirror of Nature." [51](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f51) He points out that the rise of the notion of knowledge "as a matter of rightly ordered inner representations—an unclouded and undistorting Mirror of Nature—was due to the notion that the difference between the man whose beliefs were true and the man whose beliefs were false was a matter of 'how their minds worked."'[52](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f52) According to this view, "one must believe, with Descartes and Locke, that a taxonomy of mental entities and processes will lead to discoveries which will provide one with a method of discovering truth."[53](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f53)

Rorty is impressed with the ability of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey to recognize the problem with the mirror metaphor. Wittgenstein and Heidegger come to our rescue, according to Rorty, because they suggest that we should hear statements "without seeing them as externalizing inner representations of reality." Rorty argues that this provides the opportunity to "get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether."[54](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f54) By rejecting the idea of the given and the idea of analyticity, Rorty concludes that neither metaphysical realism nor foundational epistemology is viable. Without either of these, there is no way to provide an analysis of absolute standards of rationality by which we can mediate disagreements about truth claims. Language and thought are not representations mirroring reality. Rorty concludes that Western epistemology must abandon the metaphor of the mind as a mirror.

For our purposes, it is important to note the significance of Rorty's argument that throughout the history of Western thought mirrors have served as objective standards for truth. His basic claim points to what seems to be the prevailing understanding of mirrors in Western culture.[55](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f55) When mirrors are not dirty, fogged, frost-covered, broken, or warped, they provide accurate representations of reality. Here we see the same view of mirrors that we saw in Kierkegaard's work: mirrors must be clear and transparent in order to function properly. They are not responsive objects, but passive reflectors of whatever comes before them, and the goal is always to have a clear mirror, free of impurities. While Kierkegaard focuses on the affective and volitional goal of having a heart like a mirror, Rorty discusses the epistemic goal of the mind as a mirror: the possession of "an unclouded Mirror of Nature."[56](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f56) They share the same basic Western view that mirrors tell the truth. When functioning properly, they reflect objects exactly as they are. This understanding is an obvious contrast to the Chinese view, where mirrors are seen as responsive and productive objects with the power to illumine things. **[End Page 347]**

The most obvious difference between Rorty and the other philosophers we have studied is that their projects are fundamentally constructive in a way that Rorty's is not. For Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Kierkegaard, a heart or mind like a mirror is a goal that one should pursue, whether it is the ideal state one wishes to achieve or a necessary condition for achieving a larger goal. They use the mirror metaphor to help their respective audiences understand what a particular state is like, and also to further develop the implications of their views about that state. While Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi use the mirror metaphor to describe and develop an understanding of the ideal spiritual state, Xunzi uses it to discuss one of the necessary conditions for learning about the Way. For Xunzi, unlike for Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi, a heart-mind like a mirror is one of many steps that are required on the path of ethical self-cultivation.

Rorty's use of the mirror metaphor is a contrast to all of these approaches not only because his analysis is confined to epistemology, but also because the metaphor represents the subject of his critique. Rorty suggests that the mirror metaphor is the source of the problem in Western epistemology, and as such he maintains that it should be eliminated entirely from the vocabularies of Western epistemologists. This difference is quite penetrating, because while Rorty aims to show how a metaphor can be destructive within a philosophical tradition, the Zhuangzian, Xunzian, and Kierkegaardian uses of the mirror metaphor show how metaphors can be constructive. All of these uses of the mirror metaphor show how philosophically significant metaphors can be.

# The Mirror Metaphor in a Comparative Context

In *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*, Edward Slingerland argues that conceptual metaphor analysis is a productive method for comparative philosophy, and can be used as a tool for creating genuine cross-cultural dialogue. Slingerland writes, "I would venture to guess that, beneath the surface differences in conscious theological and political commitments, one would find deeper similarities between the various traditions' metaphorical models for self and self-cultivation."[57](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f57) While Slingerland is clearly aware of the more obvious differences in the commitments of thinkers like Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Kierkegaard, and Rorty, he maintains that the differences between their "conscious commitments" are less significant than the fact that they use the same metaphors. As a result, Slingerland claims that identifying conceptual metaphors that are used across cultures and traditions can "enable a dialogue between culturally and linguistically dissimilar traditions that has the potential to improve our comprehension of both participants' positions."[58](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f58)

Following the work of cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Slingerland adopts the view that human cognition depends heavily on metaphor, which is why he maintains that the use of certain metaphorical models reveals "deeper similarities" between different cultures, even when other aspects of those cultures seem to be very different. Slingerland writes: **[End Page 348]**

Under the cognitive linguistic model, the basic schemas underlying language and other surface expressions of conceptual structure are motivated by the body and the physical environment in which it is located, which—shared in all general respects by any member of the species *Homo sapiens*, ancient or modern—provides us with a bridge into the experience of "the other." Metaphor, then, can serve as a linguistic "sign" of otherwise inaccessible, shared, deep conceptual structure.[59](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f59)

According to conceptual metaphor theory, "sensorimotor structures play a crucial role in shaping our concepts and modes of reasoning," and the most basic of these structures are "primary schemas" that result in a set of "primary metaphors" or "metaphor schemas."[60](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f60) People use metaphor schemas as their primary way of reasoning about themselves and the world.[61](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f61) This is why Slingerland maintains that the use of the same metaphors indicates deeper similarities than those indicated by the conscious commitments of different cultures, traditions, or thinkers. Accordingly, he maintains that the comparative study of metaphor schemas "represents a new, and potentially more interesting, approach to the study of intellectual history, in the sense that this conceptual 'deep grammar' is in certain respects more revealing and significant than the explicit theories themselves."[62](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f62)

In light of the evidence that we have seen of the very different uses and understandings of the mirror metaphor, Slingerland's claim about how we should understand the shared use of metaphors across cultural and philosophical traditions is of particular interest.[63](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f63) Slingerland's basic suggestion is that the use of the same metaphor by different philosophers tells us something deeper about their views than their conscious commitments or explicit theories. Based on what he says, it seems that by "conscious commitments" and "explicit theories" Slingerland means any propositional beliefs, attitudes, or claims that are not expressed metaphorically. According to the view that Slingerland presents, non-metaphorical claims would be less basic than metaphorical expressions because metaphors are part of the fundamental structure of human thought. But even if one accepts the view that human cognition depends heavily on metaphor, it is not necessarily the case that metaphorical similarities are more philosophically significant than conceptual differences. The main problem that the preceding analysis of the mirror metaphor poses for Slingerland's view is that the thinkers we have studied not only use the metaphor to defend different positions but also understand mirrors in culturally specific ways. To formulate this in terms of Slingerland's theory, it seems that there is not a shared metaphor schema that the mirror metaphor expresses in all of these cases. Indeed, the fact that Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Kierkegaard, and Rorty all use the same metaphor is a relatively thin similarity because they use it in such different ways.

We have already noted the important difference between Rorty's use of the mirror metaphor to describe an epistemic problem, which serves as a contrast to Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Kierkegaard, for whom the mirror metaphor is a way of talking about a desirable state that must be cultivated. We have also seen the differences between Zhuangzi's constitutive use and Xunzi's preparatory use of the mirror metaphor. Likewise, Kierkegaard's distinctively Christian application of the mirror metaphor serves as a contrast to Rorty's discussion of the mirror metaphor in Western **[End Page 349]** epistemology. However, perhaps the most significant difference we have seen is rooted in their culture-specific understandings of mirrors. While Zhuangzi and Xunzi maintain a distinctively Chinese understanding of mirrors as responsive and illuminative, Kierkegaard and Rorty use the metaphor of a mirror to describe and develop the idea of the heart or mind as passive and transparent. In fact, Rorty maintains that Western philosophers have traditionally been *deeply troubled* by the idea that the mind might not be functioning in this way. In the Western uses of the metaphor that we have examined, the goal is passive reflection—nothing more, nothing less. The early Chinese, on the other hand, understood mirrors to be active instruments infused with religious power largely because of their beliefs about the cosmological significance of water and fire. These views were expressed and further developed through the use of mirrors to produce these elements in a ritual context. These kinds of differences show that the shared use of metaphors does not necessarily point to deeper similarities between different views or to a shared metaphor schema that is part of the deep structure of thought.

Slingerland briefly discusses the mirror metaphor in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*. He does not offer a comparison of the metaphor in these two thinkers, but surprisingly, according to his analysis, Zhuangzi and Xunzi are not using the same metaphor schema when they use the mirror metaphor. Slingerland maintains that the mirror metaphor in the *Zhuangzi* is "linked to the SELF AS CONTAINER metaphor: a mirror works only because it is itself 'empty,' and merely responds spontaneously to what is put in front of it. Similarly, the heart/mind of the Perfected Person—once emptied through psychic fasting—is completely open and responsive to things. The mirror-response is thus the behavioral correlate to cognitive emptiness or clarity."[64](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f64) It seems that Slingerland connects the mirror metaphor with the "self as container" metaphor schema because of Zhuangzi's claim that perfected persons, like mirrors, "respond without storing." Slingerland's point, then, seems to be that the self and mirrors are both empty, like containers. One problem with this analysis is that the idea of a mirror being empty (free of defilements) and the idea of a container being empty (having nothing in it) are significantly different, making the supposed connection between the mirror metaphor and the "self as container" metaphor schema appear to be rather thin.[65](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f65)

Perhaps more importantly, this analysis neglects the other important dimensions of Zhuangzi's use of the mirror metaphor. Although it is true that mirrors "respond without storing," as we have seen, this is only one of many aspects of Zhuangzi's view about the heart-mind that he uses the mirror metaphor to describe and develop. For example, the assignment of the "self as container" metaphor schema does not explicate Zhuangzi's use of the mirror metaphor to show how the heart-mind illumines and stills other things. A similar problem arises with his analysis of the metaphor in the *Xunzi*, where he says it is "associated with the HEART/MIND AS LIGHT SOURCE scheme and 'brightness' (*ming*) metaphor through a connection that is perhaps not too much of a leap for a native English speaker, but which was even more natural to a Warring States Chinese reader, for whom mirrors were thought to gather up and project—not merely reflect—light."[66](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f66) Once again, the main problem with **[End Page 350]** Slingerland's analysis is that it highlights only one of the things Xunzi uses the mirror metaphor to express, namely the idea that mirrors can illumine things. Here we see a couple of problems with the conceptual metaphor approach as Slingerland uses it, because the analysis only reveals one aspect of the metaphor's meaning in the text. In addition, it is unclear why Slingerland highlights the ideas of "responding without storing" and "brightness" as constituting the metaphor schemas that the mirror metaphor expresses in each case, especially when other dimensions of the metaphor seem to be more pervasive, such as Zhuangzi's concern with stillness and Xunzi's concern with clarity.

Now it may be the case that Slingerland's way of emphasizing the different uses of the mirror metaphor in Zhuangzi and Xunzi is to assign them different metaphor schemas. But there are a couple of difficulties with this interpretation of his analysis. First, as we have seen, it is not obviously the case that Zhuangzi most strongly emphasizes something like the "self as container" idea in his use of the mirror metaphor, or that Xunzi solely expresses the idea of illumination. To the contrary, both figures emphasize a number of qualities, including responsiveness, clarity, stillness, and illumination. Additionally, if we interpret Slingerland's assignment of different metaphor schemas as his way of emphasizing the different ways in which the metaphor is used in Zhuangzi and Xunzi, it would seem to undermine his claim that there are "deeper similarities between the various traditions' metaphorical models for self and self-cultivation." If Slingerland aims to defend this claim, one would expect him to assign the same metaphor schemas to the same metaphors.

Before concluding, I would like briefly to entertain a possible objection to my analysis. Given the foregoing discussion, one might object to the claim that the four philosophers under study are using the same metaphor, because Zhuangzi and Xunzi discuss the heart-mind, while Kierkegaard discusses the heart and Rorty discusses the mind. The way these thinkers understand these concepts certainly plays a crucial role in the way they use the mirror metaphor, but the question of whether or not they are using the same metaphor depends largely on the nature of what the heart-mind, heart, and mind are doing when they are mirroring or reflecting things. It seems clear that all four of these philosophers are describing the state of some central and essential part of a human being when they say that the heart-mind, heart, or mind functions as a mirror when it achieves a certain state. Zhuangzi and Xunzi maintain that the heart-mind of perfected persons, sages, or *junzi* is the thing that responds appropriately to what comes before it, as a result of being calm and clear. Kierkegaard sees the heart as the source of one's decision to "will one thing" and respond to God in loving submission, which is why he calls it our "innermost being." According to Rorty's description of the mirror metaphor, the mind is the seat of all knowledge about the world, and its job is to mirror the state of affairs accurately. In all of these cases, the heart-mind, heart, or mind is the seat of the volitional, cognitive, or affective powers that constitute "mirroring." They also refer to the same object—a mirror—even if they conceive of this object in somewhat different ways.

As a result of these resemblances between their accounts, I think it is relatively clear that at least in some sense they are using the same metaphor. However, even if **[End Page 351]** one does not accept this conclusion, it is still the case that the accounts of Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Kierkegaard, and Rorty appeal to the metaphor of a mirror to describe what the heart-mind, heart, or mind does. The different ways in which they each use the metaphor in question can be instructive regardless of whether or not one maintains that they are using exactly the same metaphor.

My analysis shows that although Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Kierkegaard, and Rorty all discuss the heart or mind as a mirror, their different uses of the mirror metaphor reveal very few substantive similarities between their respective positions. Even Zhuangzi and Xunzi, who share a cultural understanding of mirrors, use the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror to illustrate and develop opposing positions. A review of these different understandings shows that metaphors must be placed in the proper cultural and philosophical settings before we can fully appreciate their meaning and significance. Then, by comparing and contrasting the different ways that philosophers of various traditions use a particular metaphor, we can see more clearly what each of the philosophers under study sets out to accomplish, and better understand the implications of their respective positions. This shows that while the analysis of metaphors often is crucial for understanding what different philosophers are saying, such analysis primarily involves the careful study of culture and philosophy and not an understanding of primary metaphors or metaphor schemas. It may be that the mirror metaphor is a poor example for illustrating the power of conceptual metaphor analysis for comparative philosophy. This essay does not aspire to assess the value of this general approach. But in the case of the mirror metaphor, careful cultural and philosophical analysis succeeds where conceptual metaphor analysis fails to offer the kind of deep, precise, and comprehensive understanding that philosophers seek.

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# Notes

[1.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f1-text)Translation adapted from Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 142 (chap. 13).

[2.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f2-text)Translation adapted from John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 107 (Xunzi 21.7b).

[3.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f3-text)For helpful studies of the mirror metaphor in Chinese thought, see Paul Demieville, "The Mirror of the Mind," trans. Neal Donner, in Peter N. Gregory, ed., **[End Page 352]** *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), pp. 13–40 (originally published as "Le Miroir Spirituel," Sinologica 1 [2] [1947]: 112–137); Harold H. Oshima, "A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Mind in Chuang-Tzu," in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), pp. 63–84; Julius Tsai, "The Mirror Metaphor in the Zhuangzi," unpublished ms., presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, Honolulu, January 1998. Karen L. Carr and Philip J. Ivanhoe also make a series of important remarks about the mirror metaphor in their *The Sense of Antirationalism: The Religious Thought of Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), pp. 38–39, 56, 71.

[4.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f4-text)Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 177. Part 1 of Kierkegaard's work *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* was originally published in English under the title *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. Throughout this essay, I refer to this edition of the text.

[5.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f5-text)Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 12.

[6.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f6-text)Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 272.

[7.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f7-text)For an overview of these and other uses and understandings of mirrors in ancient China, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 87–94.

[8.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f8-text)Carr and Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Antirationalism*, p. 38.

[9.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f9-text)Oshima, "A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Mind in Chuang-Tzu," p. 75. With the exception of terms appearing in titles, for consistency I have converted all Wade-Giles romanizations to pinyin in this essay.

[10.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f10-text)Adapted from Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 69 (chap. 5).

[11.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f11-text)Ibid., p. 97 (chap. 7).

[12.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f12-text)Ibid., p. 142 (chap. 13).

[13.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f13-text)Adapted from ibid., p. 97 (chap. 7).

[14.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f14-text)Ibid., p. 38 (chap. 2).

[15.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f15-text)Ibid., p. 40 (chap. 2).

[16.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f16-text)As Julius Tsai has pointed out, mirrors were thought to "provide better and truer insight into the nature of things, people, and spirits, revealing what was hidden to the naked eye" (Tsai, "The Mirror Metaphor in the Zhuangzi," p. 5).

[17.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f17-text)Adapted from Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 69 (chap. 5). **[End Page 353]**

[18.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f18-text)Ibid. The idea that virtuous individuals have de, a kind of moral charisma that attracts others and has a settling effect on them, seems to be implied in this passage. For a helpful study of this concept, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, "The Concept of de ('Virtue') in the Laozi," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the* Laozi, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Mark Csikszentmihalyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 239–257.Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 69

[19.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f19-text)Adapted from Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 142 (chap. 13).

[20.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f20-text)Philip J. Ivanhoe has coined the phrase "pre-reflective intuitions" to refer to the innate tendencies that are already moving us toward the proper ends in life for Zhuangzi. A. C. Graham has also discussed the significance of pre-reflective tendencies in Zhuangzi's thought. See Carr and Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Antirationalism*, pp. 33–42, and Graham, "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought,"' in Mair, *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, pp. 3–23.

[21.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f21-text)It is also possible that Zhuangzi and Xunzi are drawing on a common literature, which is lost to us, but because of the similarity in imagery and what we know of the history of these texts, it is at least plausible to infer a direct borrowing. However, nothing in my analysis depends on this being true. In addition to Xunzi, Chinese Buddhists also picked up the mirror metaphor and developed it in a distinctive way. In turn, the Neo-Confucians adapted the metaphor from the Chinese Buddhist usage. For a helpful study of the interaction between the Buddhist and Confucian traditions in China, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

[22.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f22-text)Adapted from Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 3 : 107 (*Xunzi* 21.7a); my emphasis.

[23.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f23-text)Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 3 : 107

[24.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f24-text)Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 3 : 107

[25.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f25-text)T. C. Kline III has made the helpful distinction between "outside-in" approaches to self-cultivation, such as Xunzi's, where one's behavior is reformed from the outside through the use of traditions and teachers, which eventually work to transform one's internal feelings, inclinations, and attitudes, and "inside-out" approaches, such as Mengzi's, which argue that one must begin by appealing to certain internal feelings as a way of reforming one's behavior. See T. C. Kline III, "Moral Agency and Motivation in the Xunzi," in T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the* Xunzi (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), pp. 155–175.

[26.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f26-text)For example, Xunzi writes:

A piece of wood straight as a plumb line can, by steaming, be made pliable enough to bend into the shape of a wheel rim, so its curvature will conform to the compass. Yet, even though it is then allowed to dry out completely in the sun, it will not return to its former straightness because the process of steaming has effected this change in it. So, too, wood that has been marked out with the plumb line will be straight and metal **[End Page 354]** that has been put to the whetstone will be sharp. In broadening his learning, the *junzi* each day examines himself so that his awareness will be discerning and his actions without excess.

(Adapted from Knoblock, Xunzi, 1 : 135 [Xunzi 1.1])

[27.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f27-text)Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 3 : 107 (*Xunzi* 21.7b).

[28.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f28-text)David S. Nivison, "Xunzi and Zhuangzi," in Kline and Ivanhoe, *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in* the Xunzi, p. 181.

[29.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f29-text)David S. Nivison, "Xunzi and Zhuangzi," in Kline and Ivanhoe, *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in* the Xunzi, p. 181.

[30.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f30-text)Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 3 : 108 (*Xunzi* 21.7d).

[31.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f31-text)Ibid., p. 109 (*Xunzi* 21.8).

[32.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f32-text)I do not intend to minimize the diversity that exists within the Chinese and Western traditions. Indeed, the four thinkers I have chosen to focus on in this essay illustrate well the diversity that exists within their respective traditions. Despite this diversity, however, there remain some shared cultural understandings of things. In this essay, I will focus on those features of the Chinese understanding of the heart-mind that are shared by Xunzi and Zhuangzi, as well as those features of the Western understanding of the heart and mind that are shared by Kierkegaard and Rorty in their discussions of the mirror metaphor. I also focus on the cultural understandings of mirrors that are apparent in their various discussions of the mirror metaphor.

[33.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f33-text)Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, p. 177.

[34.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f34-text)This is the general account Kierkegaard gives in *Purity of Heart* and a number of other places as well. For a detailed study of these aspects of Kierkegaard's view, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[35.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f35-text)Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, p. 55.

[36.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f36-text)Ibid., p. 56.

[37.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f37-text)Ibid., pp. 176–177.

[38.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f38-text)Ibid.

[39.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f39-text)There is an interesting point of comparison with Zhuangzi here. Both Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard call for humans to surrender themselves, but for Zhuangzi this means surrendering our egoistic perspectives to the Way, which moves in each of us and throughout the world. For Kierkegaard, humans must surrender their wills to God in an acknowledgment of the need for God's transforming power. For a detailed comparison of these aspects of Zhuangzi's and Kierkegaard's thought, see Carr and Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Antirationalism*, pp. 58–89.

[40.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f40-text)Kierkegaard presents a distinctively Protestant and Lutheran view of grace here by emphasizing one's absolute dependence on God. **[End Page 355]**

[41.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f41-text)Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, p. 176.

[42.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f42-text)Ibid.

[43.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f43-text)Ibid., p. 55.

[44.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f44-text)Ibid., p. 72. It is worth noting the similarity between Kierkegaard's view and Kant's view of our proper relationship to the moral law.

[45.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f45-text)Ibid., p. 93.

[46.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f46-text)Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 12.

[47.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f47-text)Ibid., p. 60 n. 32.

[48.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f48-text)Ibid., p. 12. Rorty's description of Kant's view, as with his discussion of a number of other details in the history of Western philosophy, is not entirely accurate. Kant is a clear exception to the assumption about the mind's role in the search for truth that Rorty attributes to Western epistemologists. Kant explicitly rejects the view that it is possible to mirror the world with his contention that the mind plays an important role in shaping our perception of the world. Rorty's account fails to capture Plato's view for similar reasons. For Plato, we do not attempt to reflect things in the world, but through them grasp the *eidos* behind things in the world.

[49.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f49-text)Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 100–101.

[50.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f50-text)Ibid., p. 357.

[51.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f51-text)Ibid., p. 392.

[52.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f52-text)Ibid., p. 248.

[53.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f53-text)Ibid., p. 249.

[54.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f54-text)Ibid., p. 371.

[55.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f55-text)Western understandings of mirrors are more diverse than Rorty indicates. Examples of Western folk beliefs in which mirrors are not understood as mere passive reflectors of reality can be seen in stories such as *Snow White* and *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as vampire stories. Rorty's view, however, certainly describes the way that mirrors have been understood in most philosophical and religious texts.

[56.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f56-text)Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 309.

[57.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f57-text)Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, p. 272.

[58.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f58-text)Ibid.

[59.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f59-text)Ibid., p. 273.

[60.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f60-text)Ibid., pp. 21–22.

[61.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f61-text)Ibid., pp. 22–23. For every metaphorical expression, there is a corresponding metaphor schema. One of Slingerland's examples is the metaphorical expression **[End Page 356]** "I'm moving right along on the project," which expresses the metaphor schema ACTIONS ARE SELF-PROPELLED MOTIONS.

[62.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f62-text)Ibid., p. 272.

[63.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f63-text)There have been many discussions of how we should view metaphors, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an overview of them. It is worth noting, however, the position that occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from conceptual metaphor theory. According to this view, metaphors are simply illustrative devices with no message or use beyond the literal meaning. An example of this sort of view is seen in the work of Donald Davidson, who maintains that metaphors "mean what the words in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more" (see Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 30). This essay assumes that metaphors can serve illustrative functions as well as being transformers of meaning. It seems clear, for example, that the mirror metaphor was used both to express and to shape early Chinese views of the xin. This point can be appreciated from a careful study of this metaphor, independently of one's adoption or rejection of conceptual metaphor theory.

[6](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f64-text)4. Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, p. 192.



Fig. 1. Plate with Embossed Figure of Shapur II Hunting Lions, Sassanian, 4th century, partially gilded silver, Diam. 22.9 cm.The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. After Ryoichi Hayashi, *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in,* trans. Robert Ricketts (New York:Weatherhill, 1975), pl. 140.

[65.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f65-text)Another difficulty with Slingerland's claim that the mirror metaphor expresses the "self as container" metaphor schema is the view that Zhuangzi believes that the self is a container to be emptied. Slingerland notes that Zhuangzi's view is that what needs to be emptied are "all of the human distinctions that have accumulated and thereby blocked one's access to the Way," and he mentions the importance of "forgetting/expelling externalities if one is to harmonize one's internal skill with the Way" (*Effortless Action*, p. 186). So it seems that Slingerland thinks the container of the self must only be *partly* emptied—of the harmful, artificial contents but not of its originally good contents (one's "internal skill"). Woodcarver Qing's statement that he "matches up 'Heaven' with 'Heaven"' clearly expresses Zhuangzi's view of the Heaven that is within humans, as a part of their originally good nature (Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 206). In Slingerland's discussion, he notes that "Qing is able to be open to the Heavenly nature (*tianxing*) of the mountain trees and skillfully harmonize his inner state (the 'Heaven' within) with the Way (the 'Heaven' without)" (*Effortless Action*, p. 186). It is not clear in what sense the self can be empty—like a container—if there is still something inside (the "Heaven" within). This discrepancy would seem to indicate that Zhuangzi's view might not be an expression of the "self as container" metaphor schema.

[66.](http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.mit.edu/journals/philosophy_east_and_west/v058/58.3.cline.html" \l "f66-text)Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, p. 227.

Tang Dynasty Mirrors

The casting of bronze mirrors with elaborate decoration on the reverse can be traced back in Chinese history to the beginning of the Bronze Age. Not only were such mirrors used in daily life, they were also considered sacred objects. Many scholarly studies on the decor of

mirrors of the Han dynasty (206 BC—AD 220) have addressed the symbolic portrayal of the universe and the forces within it. By the Tang dynasty (618-9o7), however, the happiness of this world as well as glorification

of the ideal world appear in mirror decoration.' The celestial context of the ornamentation gradually gave way to the idealization of a blissful land. Undoubtedly, the Tang people regarded bronze mirrors as durable

precious treasures. Materials such as gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl were expressively applied, with imaginative birds and flowers, fantastic animals, and grapevines floating exuberantly across these sumptuous surfaces.2

In major museum collections around the world, Tang mirrors of exquisite quality often stand out from other bronze decorative art.

Furthermore, Tang mirrors survive in noticeably larger quantities than earlier bronze mirrors, which suggests a growing presence at that time of socially and economically prominent gentry and merchants. Wealthy cosmopolitan patrons living in this prosperous and stable time created a

market of sumptuous artistic connoisseurship that reached its peak around the late seventh to the beginning of the eighth century. As Professor Ju­hsi Chou has pointed out,3 the dynastic capitals, or at times secondary capitals, tended to be centers for the production and consumption

of mirrors. By the Tang dynasty, in addition to the capitals,Yangzhou produced exquisite mirrors and sent the best ones to the imperial court as tribute."

The opening of China's frontiers and the influx of Buddhist culture brought with it new inspiration for the vocabulary of decorative art. Many novel and exotic foreign objects were imported along the silk routes. At the same time, the Chinese worked on their own innovative ideas to fulfill their sense of creativity.s The imperial house patronized skilled metalsmiths and cultivated the taste for refined details, luxuriant designs, and inlays such as lacquer, glass, gold, and silver. The refined techniques developed in gold and silver ware, such as the Sassanian silver plate with partially gilded embossed figures (fig. 1), provided critical inspiration for the production ofTang mirrors.

The cosmopolitan culture of Tang China not only reflected intensive interests in western counterparts, but also exerted a strong impact on Korea and Japan in the east. In fact, many superb Tang mirrors among those best known today are in the Shoso-in repository of the Tociai-ji monastery at Nara in Japan. This legendary collection of imported Tang decorative art was primarily inherited from Emperor Shomu (r. 724-749).The emperor, a devoted Buddhist, made the initial

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| Fig. 2. Octafoil Bracket-lobed Mirror with Landscape [picturing the realm of immortals] and the Eight Divinatory Trigrams, silvered bronze, Diam. 40.7 cm. Shoso-in, Nara. After *Nihon bijutsu zenslal* (Tokyo: Gakusha Kenkyajo, 1978), 5: 53. |  |

dedication of precious religious implements to the eye-opening ceremony of the bronze Great Buddha of the Todai-ji in 752. After Shomu died in 756, his widow, the dowager empress Komyo, dedicated to the Buddha more than one thousand items from the late emperor's favorite personal and household belongings in five installments!' Included in this mid eighth-century repository are many Tang artworks ranking from fairly high to the very best quality, even by Chinese standards.

The legacy of the Sh5so-in collection provides us profound examples for the technical excellence and exquisite design ofTang decorative art. The large quantity of mirrors (more than fifty) in

the collection demonstrates that bronze mirrors were indeed highly appreciated by the court. Notable in this context is the eight-lobed mirror with silver back depicting the realm of the immortals (fig. 2).

Luxurious Tang mirrors preserve the world of artistic imagination as well as the cultural memory of the people at the time. To understand fully the iconology of the decorative motifs on these mirrors, one has to look further into decorative arts such as textiles, gold and silver, pottery, and architectural decoration. In general, however, unlike the abstract

cosmological patterns of the Han TLV mirrors,' those of the Tang era focus more closely on the living world of birds and flowers, animated animals, and idealized immortals living in a scenic garden. The following paper discusses four types of ornamentation of Tang mirrors: floral motifs, birds and flowers, plants and animals, and landscapes and figures.

*Floral Motifs*

Floral motifs are probably the most common decoration on Tang mirrors. In addition to depictions of peony, camellia, and gardenia on the backs, the contours of many mirrors are themselves designed to imitate that of a full-blown flower with six or more petals. A splendid example is an eight‑

lobed mirror with floral motif in the Sumitomo collection of the Sen­oku Hakko Kan (fig. 3). In the outer circle, an array of eight large floral patterns fills up the entire space with a sense of voluptuous elegance. A mirror of similar design is in the Carter collection (fig. 4); both are in the style of the eighth century.



Fig. 3. Eight-lobed Mirror with Eight Blossoms, 8th century. Sumitomo collection, Sen-oku Hakko Kan, Kyoto. After Higuchi Takayasu, *Kyookan* (Kyoto: Senoku Hakko Kan, 199o), pl. 87.



Fig. 4. Lobed Mirror with Six Blossoms, 8th century, Diam. 19.1 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs. Thomas and Martha Carter in Honor of Sherman E. Lee, 1995.36o.

In fact, variations of lobed and foliated mirrors became the favorite contours of the Tang craftsman. The popularity of flower motifs, especially that of the lotus flower, has always been associated with the demands of Buddhism. For example, a brilliantly painted and gilded wood object in the form of a lotus (fig. 5) presumably served as a base for an offering lamp used in a temple. The icon of a fully blossoming lotus flower is

also a prominent decorative element in Buddhist architecture in the Yungang cave temples during the Northern Wei dynasty around the 46os. Moreover, from early Buddhism on, lotus flowers were widely applied

to halos, for instance, to symbolize the brightness of Buddha's wisdom. However, we should not overlook the fact that as early as the Han dynasty, the lotus flower was often painted on the ceiling of a tomb chamber

to symbolize the celestial body.' Therefore, the widely applied lotus flower on mirrors seems to be a happy combination of ancient symbolic association and newly popularized Buddhism.

Besides the lotus flower, floral motifs on Tang mirrors were often inspired by sophisticated designs on textiles imported from the Near East through the Silk Road. With great enthusiasm, Tang emperors demanded that scholars in the court prepare meticulous records and studies of the exotic plants, animals, and artifacts brought by foreign envoys.9 Such



Fig. *5.* Lotus-flower-shaped Pedestal, lacquer and gold-leaf on wood, H. 17 cm. Shoso-in, Nara. After *Nihon bijutsu zenshtl,* 5: 94, 95•records provided a wide-ranging array of innovative ideas to the delight of the aristocratic society in the capital.

The roundel pattern in the center of the Shaso-in mirror with mother-of-pearl inlay (fig. 6) is as splendid as that of a multicolored rug. Four smaller roundels appear equally spaced in the outer circle. Set against a black lacquer background, mother-of-pearl as well as amber,

tortoise shell, and rock crystal are employed to compose a fantastic design. The iridescent brilliance of the mother-of-pearl and the bright colors

of the stones achieve a glittering effect on the surface, at the same time suggesting volume and mass in their curvilinear forms.

Another powerful example of floral motifs is seen on the gold and glass-backed cloisonné mirror (fig. 7). Of shiny silver on the front, on the back are three overlapping layers of six-lobed lotus-flower patterns in gold and cloisonné enamels.The striking lotus petals are covered with patterns and stripes in relief in green, black, and brown, imitating the taste of

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| . | Fig. 6. Mirror, mother-of-pearl inlay, Diam. 27.2 cm. Shoso-in, Nara. After *Nihon bijutsu zenshu, 5:* 49, so |

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| Fig. 8. Mirror *with Pingtuo (Heidatsu)* Decoration, 8th century, Diam. 19.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard. Hanna Jr. Fund, 1973.74. |  |

*Birds and Flowers*

Bird-and-flower motifs, especially that of a bird holding a flowering branch in its beak, are considered auspicious signs in Chinese tradition. Floral patterns and blossoms take on an almost metaphysical quality in the lively design of an eight-lobed mirror backed with gold and silver in the Cleveland Museum of Art collection and a square one with a similar Fig. 7. Mirror, silver with gold and glass (cloisonné enamel) inlay, Diam. 18.5 cm. Shoso-in, Nara. After *Nihon bijutsu zensha,* 5: 51.three-color pottery popular at the time. The distinct sculptural quality sets it apart from other Tang mirrors, and it is unique in every aspect of design, material, and technique.



Fig. 9. Mirror with *Pingtuo (Heidatsu)* Decoration, 8th century, H. 14.9 cm. Asia Society; New York, Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III Collection of Asian Art, 1979.119.

design in the Asia Society collection in New York (figs. 8, 9).A special technique of decoration, called *pingtuo* in Chinese or *heidatsu* in Japanese, is applied to this type of mirror. Delicate designs of birds, flowers cut

in gold, and silver leaves are embedded in a lacquered surface. Against the black-lacquer background, the thin strips of gold and silver decor display a distinctive high luster. Although different in shape, these two

mirrors follow the same symmetrical design order and can be dated to the beginning of the eighth century.

One of the strengths of the Tang mirrors in the Carter collection falls in the category of simple yet elegant bird-and-flower mirrors (fig. Io). An interesting comparison is offered by a piece in the National Palace Museum,Taipei (fig. ii). Serenity permeates the compositions of these two eight-lobed mirrors.A pair of ducks or phoenixes in flight, symbolizing auspiciousness and happiness in marriage, makes mirrors of this kind precious presents for weddings and other occasions. In addition, the brilliant rosette pattern on the top of the mirror in the National Palace Museum and the symmetrical branches of flowers on the Carter mirror each display a sense of harmony and prosperity appropriate for good wishes.



Fig. io. Mirror with Paired Phoenixes and Floral Displays, 8th century, Diam. 14.8 cm.The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs.Thomas and Martha Carter in Honor of Sherman E. Lee, 1995.348.

Fig. ii. Flower-shaped Mirror with Lotus and Pair of Ducks, 8th century, Diam.

18.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Li 74.18. After *Gugong tongjing tezhan*

*tulu* [Catalogue of a special exhibition of bronze mirrors] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1986), pl. III.

*Plants and Animals*

Undoubtedly, animal-and-grapevine mirrors are the most famous Tang mirrors. Such mirrors are well documented and make up the largest group from the tombs dated between 664 and 711.10 Grapes were introduced into China from the west as early as the Han dynasty." Animal-and-grapevine mirrors characterize best the sculptural quality and compelling energy of the Tang culture in the latter half of the seventh

to the beginning of the eighth century. The decorations on two mirrors in the Carter collection (figs. 12, 13) demonstrate the excellence of the type.The more sophisticated one (fig. 13) displays a delight of energy and abundance. Heavy grapevines and grapes float into the background like a melody eulogizing the world of bird and animal. In the center field, playing in the midst of grapevines, six lion-like creatures, including the one crouching in the middle, each look in various directions in metaphysical poses. In the outer field, birds either spread their wings or stand still vigilantly. Realistic details of the animals, such as their fur and spines, are carefully described to attract the attention of the viewer.



Fig. 12. Animal-and-Grape Mirror, mid 7th century, Diam. 8.2 cm.The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs.Thomas and Martha Carter in Honor of Sherman E. Lee, 1995.356.

Fig. 13. Animal-and-Grape Mirror, late 7th century, Diam. 13.9 cm.The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs. Thomas and Martha Carter in Honor of Sherman E. Lee, 1995.355.

Simple but vigorous designs of bird and animal are set against a clear background in the bracket-shaped mirror in the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University. In the large center field, amid scrolls of fully blossoming flowers, two fantastic animals and two phoenixes occupy the four directions. The joyfully strutting lions each raise one paw and hold a flowering branch in another paw while looking at phoenixes perching in the back. In the narrow outer field,

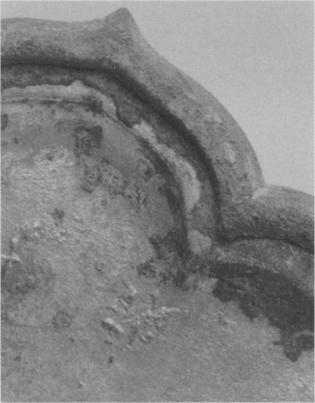


Fig. 14b. Detail showing inscribed date under the inset plaque [note: the

inscription was incised in the mold and appears backwards on the mirror]. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.52.168. Photograph courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University.

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| Fig. I4a. Mirror with Foliate Rim and with Inset Silver Plaque, dated 693, cast bronze with inset silver repousse plaque, Diam. 15.8 cm. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.52.168. Photograph courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University. |  |

peaceful garden scenes with birds and flowers are depicted. Mirrors of this type have been found in tombs datable to the period from 690 to 71o.

A related bronze mirror, also at the Sackler museum (fig. i4a), provides additional documentation. An inscription incised under the silver backing of the mirror bears the date of 693 (fig. 14b).'' The knob at the center assumes a crouching zoomorphic form, from which radiate six circles. Inside each circle a striding animal reaches out to touch its enclosing vine scroll with its paws.The outer circle of the mirror is decorated with eight brackets, each depicting either a branch of a flower or a bird.

Before closing the discussion on animal motifs, let us consider

one last but not the least important subject—the dragon mirror. Closely identified with Chinese culture and commonly employed as a decorative motif in every artistic medium since the Shang dynasty *(c. i600—m23 Be),* dragon mirrors seem to have become popular in the eighth century. A mirror in the Carter collection presents a full moon in the shape of

a dragon (see p. 43, fig. 2). The dragon's head and neck twist up to the right, legs up in the air and wide-open mouth touching the knob of the mirror. Small puffs of cloud emerge from the feet and float into the sky. The curvilinear movement of the composition and powerful modeling of the dragon in this type of mirror demonstrate well the compelling forces of the universe.

*Landscape and Human Figures*

Human figures appear in Tang mirrors first as part of hunting scenes, a motif popular in the mural painting of the imperial tombs dating from the late seventh to the beginning of the eighth century. The theme of hunting for pleasure took another ancient and metaphysical form as the

search for immortality; as early as the Warring States period (481-221 Bc), in many tombs the soul of the deceased riding on a dragon on the way to immortality was depicted." Two splendid examples are in the Sumitomo and the Carter collections (figs. 15, 16).The simplified rocks with vegetation on the Carter mirror indicate the land of the immortals; on the Tokyo mirror, a cloud leads each dragon or phoenix to the ideal world.

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| Fig. 15. Eight-lobed Mirror with Four Immortals, 8th century. Sumitomo collection, Sen-oku Hakko-kan. After Higuchi Takayasu, *Kyookan,* pl. 97. |  |

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| Fig. 16. Octafoil Mirror with Hunters and Prey, late 7th—early 8th century, Diam. 19.9 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs. Thomas and Martha Carter in Honor of Sherman E. Lee, 1995.365. |  |

The most elaborate depiction of the Taoist realm of the immortals is the large silver-backed mirror in the Shoso-in (fig. 2). Encircling

the outer frame of the mirror, full-fledged geese, ducks, peacocks, and phoenixes perch on large flower heads attached to long baroque scrolls. The landscape depicting an auspicious land of happiness in the large inner circle is a new motif of Tang mirrors. Like pivots of the four quarters,

mountains rise above the ocean in the center. In the intermediate spaces appears either a flying dragon or a gentleman playing music accompanied by a dancing crane. This delightful and detailed composition must have derived from the emergence of the mature landscape painting style in the eighth century.

By the mid eighth century, the human figure appears in the landscape, relaxing in a confined corner of a private garden. A lobed mirror with a tortoise knob, musician, and phoenix (see p. 56, fig. 12) is a good example. In front of the bamboo grove, a musician or immortal sits down to play for the dancing phoenix. In between, a lotus pond is decorated with rocks. A mirror with a comparable motif was excavated

from a tomb in Luoyang dating to 784:4 The back of this mirror is inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a bold pictorial rendition of a joyful garden party (see p. 36, fig. II). At either side of a blossoming tree sits a gentleman entertained by wine and music. The rest of the space is filled with an attendant, a few birds, rocks, and wine vessels. The soft and voluminous rendering of the motif characterizes that of the Tianbao era (742-755) or even later.

The elaborate ornament of meticulously depicted flowers and animals in these mirrors celebrates the good wishes and prosperity enjoyed by the Tang people. Concern with naturalism and a search for ideal beauty compete with each other within the design. The cosmopolitan culture in the capital opened up a new range of imagination and expression for

the artists and artisans. The mature style of Tang art captures the enduring energy of the universe in microcosm.

NOTES

1. Chuan-yingYen, "Tangdai tongjing wenshi zhi neirong yu fengge" [Decorative patterns on Tang bronze mirrors], *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology,* Academia Sinica, 60, part 2 (1989), 289­*353.*
2. Kong Xiangxing, "Sui tang tongjing de leixing yu fenqi" [Typology and periodization of Sui and Tang mirrors], in *Zhongguo kaogu xuehui di yi ci nianhui lunwenji* (Beijing:Wenwu, 1980), 380-99.
3. Ju-hsi Chou, *Circles of Reflection: The Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2000), 7.
4. One of the earliestYangzhou mirrors was produced in mid autumn of 622 and inscribed as a tribute to the court on the first day of 623. Wang Fu, *Chongxiu Xuanhe bogutu (c. 117o-80)* [Revised illustrated antiques of the Xuanhe era *(c.* 1170-80)], reprint of 1603 edition (Taipei: Xinxing, 1969), 29: 16.
5. Jessica Rawson, "The Ornament on Chinese Silver in the Tang dynasty (AD 618-906)," *British Museum Occasional Paper,* no. 40 (London: British Museum, 5982), 1.
6. Ryoichi Hayashi, *The Silk Road and the ShOsii-in,* trans. Robert Ricketts, vol. 6 of *Heibonsha Survey ofJapanese Art* (NewYork: Weatherhill, 1975), 34-62.
7. The TLV pattern resembles the three Roman letters; it is thought to have cosmological significance.
8. Hayashi Minao, "Chilgoku kodai ni okeru renge no shocho" [The symbol of the lotus flower in ancient China], *T5h5 Gakuho* 59 (1987), 1-61.
9. Emperor Taizong, for instance, ordered just such a careful official record in

647. See *Tang hui yao* [Tang dynasty encyclopedia] (Taipei: Shi jie shu ju, 1960), 100: 1796.

1. At least fifteen animal-and-grape mirrors have been discovered in dated tombs; the earliest one is dated 664; see *Wenwu,* no. 7 (1972), 33-41. For the list of dated tombs with animal-and-grapevine mirrors, see Yen, "Tangdai tongjing," 335.
2. Schuyler Cammann, "The Lion and Grape Patterns on Chinese Bronze Mirrors," *Artibus Asiae* 16 (1953), 265-91.

12.The inscription was first published by Umehara Sueharu, *Toky5Taikan* [Conspectus ofTang mirrors] (Kyoto: Dohosha, 1984, reprint of 1945 edition), pl. 99b and pp. I00-I01.

1. Sofukawa Hiroshi, "Kandai gazoseki niokeru shosenzu no keifu" [The lineage of ascending immortals in the pictorial stone of the Han dynasty], *Toho Gakuho 65* (1993), 23-221.

*Wenwu,* no. 5 (1956), 41