Lessons of the dragon: Bruce Lee and perfectionism between East and West

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Abstract
This article endeavors to understand the work of Bruce Lee, particularly his appearance on the US television series *Longstreet* (1971–1972), with reference to the philosophical concept of perfectionism. Although in extant scholarship Lee has often been presented as an anti-Confucian figure, this article reexamines Lee’s Confucian connections vis-à-vis perfectionism. By virtue of an investigation into the centrality of the concepts of character, volition, and self-actualization in Confucianism, in conjunction with an analysis of their prominence in Western (specifically, Aristotelian and Emersonian) philosophy, this article situates Lee between Eastern and Western perfectionist traditions. This article then examines Lee’s work on *Longstreet* in an effort to elucidate the perfectionist ethos that fueled Lee’s philosophy of Jeet Kune Do and, by extension, his media pedagogy regarding teaching and learning martial arts. Ultimately, this article argues that Lee represents a quintessential perfectionist pedagogue and that the most important lessons to be learned from Lee involve such perfectionist hallmarks as building character, cultivating virtue, and self-actualizing.

Keywords
Aristotle, Bruce Lee, Confucius, Longstreet, perfectionism

Introduction
At the “Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies” conference which occasioned this special issue of *Global Media and China* (organized by myself and Paul Bowman and held at Cardiff University in July 2018), I delivered a presentation entitled “Dragon Seeks Path: Bruce Lee and the Way of Perfectionism” (Barrowman, 2018). The purpose of my presentation was to elucidate the concept of perfectionism with reference to the work of Aristotle (via Ayn Rand) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (via Stanley Cavell) and to demonstrate key affinities between perfectionist philosophy and the
philosophy of Bruce Lee.\textsuperscript{1} During the discussion period after my presentation, Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park asked me if/how my articulation of this distinctly Western conception of perfectionism aligned with any Eastern philosophy, and he asked specifically about the Confucian tradition. At the time, I replied by admitting my ignorance of Confucianism; though I acknowledged that it was an interesting question to ponder, and one with possible implications worth thinking about in relation to my interests in Bruce Lee and perfectionism, I also had to acknowledge that I simply was not equipped to offer an opinion.

In a discussion of the circulation and transmission of Eastern philosophy in the West, Paul Bowman (2019, p. 91) observes how often what gets circulated are merely “bits” of this philosophy or that—bits of Confucianism here and bits of Daoism there. Speaking for myself, while I had over the years picked up bits of Daoism here and there, I possessed not even a single bit of Confucianism. This essay, then, is by no means an expert’s discourse (cf. Bowman, 2019, pp. 91-106); rather, it is an index of a Westerner’s introduction to Confucianism by way of Bruce Lee. On the one hand, some may bridle at the arrogance implicit in my desire to speak on a subject with which I have only recently become acquainted; I may be setting myself up for the stock charge of “orientalism.” Against this objection, it is my position that such cross-cultural encounters are among that which we, as fans and scholars, owe Bruce Lee, for a large part of his endeavor was to facilitate precisely these types of cross-cultural conversations and exchanges. On the other hand, some may object to my focus on Confucianism as opposed to Daoism; I may be charged, in my attempt to elucidate Lee’s perfectionism between East and West, with focusing on the “wrong” East. After all, beyond his own avowed and explicit interest in Daoism, was Lee’s philosophical position not fundamentally antithetical to Confucianism? This is a far more serious objection, and, though it will require the rest of this essay to answer it properly, I would like to make a few brief remarks on this point here at the start.

Matthew Polly, for one, has argued that, in contrast to “Confucian reverence” for cultural tradition and familial heritage, Lee “drew deeply from the American ideal of individualism” in his efforts “to form a more perfect person” (Polly, 2018, pp. 203-204). If this is true, then one could argue, as Polly does, that what audiences, particularly Chinese audiences, saw in Bruce Lee was “a free man” with no ties to “any institution or even, seemingly, the constraints of two thousand years of Confucianism” (Polly, 2018, p. 294). On Polly’s account, Lee’s individualism and his pursuit of perfection mark his break from rather than his continuity with Confucianism. Daniele Bolelli makes a similar argument, though, rather than pitting Confucianism against American individualism as Polly did, Bolelli (2003/2008) pits it against a quasi-Nietzschean, antiauthoritarian conception of Daoism of which he alleges Lee was an adherent (pp. 154-184). According to Bolelli, “not a trace of Confucianism can be found” in Lee’s philosophy; on the contrary, Lee allegedly “stood in firm opposition to the most dogmatic aspects of Chinese tradition cherished by Confucianism” and his philosophy represents what Bolelli (2003/2008) conceives of as a radical Daoist “rebellion against Confucian ideals” (p. 161).\textsuperscript{2} While Polly’s and Bolelli’s accounts do capture important aspects of Lee’s philosophical attitude/orientation, John Little offers a more balanced perspective on Lee’s inheritance of Eastern philosophy:

Growing up in Hong Kong, where the influence of the great Chinese belief systems such as Confucianism and Taoism is still strong, Lee naturally was exposed to both systems . . . However, rather than simply adopting the tenets of either system, Lee opted instead to run both systems through [his own] filter . . . with the result that only those principles that [he had determined to his own satisfaction] were—at a root or metaphysical level—true were accepted as valid. (Little, 2001, p. 199)
On Little’s terms, to characterize Lee as a committed contrarian with respect to Confucianism or as a committed adherent of Daoism would be equally misguided. Rather, Lee was a decidedly piecemeal thinker. Therefore, in what follows, even though I will be emphasizing Lee’s affinities with Confucianism in an effort to refute the erroneous conception of Lee as thoroughly anti-Confucian, I will not be doing so toward the goal of proving that Lee was more, or mostly, or totally Confucian and therefore less, or only marginally, or not at all Daoist. I am wholly unconcerned with pitting Confucianism against Daoism (to say nothing of calculating some sort of mathematical ratio of Confucianism to Daoism in Lee’s philosophy). From this point on, I will seldom even mention Daoism. In what follows, I simply wish to illuminate Lee’s position between perfectionism as it has manifested in the Western philosophical tradition, most notably in the writings of Aristotle and Emerson, and perfectionism as it has manifested in the Eastern philosophical tradition, most notably in the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius*.

Having in mind Little’s point about how only those principles that Lee had determined to be true were accepted as valid and incorporated into his own philosophy, I intend to elucidate the terms of Lee’s media pedagogy—focusing in particular on Lee’s role in the American television series *Longstreet* (1971–1972)—toward the goal of identifying key Confucian principles at work therein and explicating their significance to Lee’s perfectionist conception and dissemination of Jeet Kune Do. Before turning to Lee’s media pedagogy, however, I must first establish the salient points of contact between the philosophical traditions of perfectionism between East and West.

### Perfectionism between East and West

With a focus on Lee’s (1971a) philosophical writings, and on his epochal essay “Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate” in particular, I have sought previously to explicate the basic terms of perfectionism in the Western philosophical tradition and to uncover the perfectionist ethos at the core of Lee’s philosophical enterprise (Barrowman, 2018, 2019). In the interest of time and space, I will consider that argument made. I will not recapitulate my argument for understanding Lee’s philosophical enterprise as of a piece with the Western perfectionist tradition. My purpose in what follows will be to argue for understanding Lee’s perfectionist philosophical enterprise as consistent with Confucianism, which will necessitate the bringing in line of two distinct philosophical traditions with reference to key shared concepts and principles. In this section, I will explore the salient points of contact between the Eastern and Western perfectionist traditions with reference to the concepts of *character*, *volition*, and *self-actualization*; while, in the following section, I will expand the discussion to consider principles of learning and teaching as they manifest in Lee’s media pedagogy.

In the introduction, I identified two possible objections that could be made against my efforts here, the first having to do with my scholarly position vis-à-vis Confucianism and the second having to do with my choice of Confucianism rather than Daoism as a means to understand Lee’s philosophical enterprise. In this first section, I must ward off a third objection: Is it not impossible to compare two different philosophies without at best obliterating the nuances of each or at worst reducing one to the other? This objection is the bane of comparative philosophy. Robert B. Louden has eloquently expressed the dilemma with which comparative philosophers are met: On the one hand, “in our reach for otherness, we need to try harder to put our own philosophical agendas on hold” lest we allow “our own conceptual baggage” to “get in the way of cross-cultural understanding,” and yet, on the other hand, “if we put our beliefs on hold . . . we rule out the possibility of understanding others,” for “we cannot begin to make sense out of others unless we presuppose that
we do indeed share a great many fundamental beliefs in common” (Louden, 2002, pp. 85-86). In my estimation, this is only a dilemma for those who subscribe to what amounts to a yoking together of determinism (specifically, a cultural determinism according to which different cultures determine different philosophical differences which, in turn, determine different realities and different values) and relativism (both epistemological relativism, manifest in incompatible/irreconcilable concepts, and ethical relativism, manifest in incompatible/irreconcilable values). As I do not subscribe to this yoking together of determinism and relativism—I subscribe, instead, to the position that there is one objective reality about which it is possible to discover (indeed, about which there has been discovered) knowledge pertaining to facts and values relevant to and valid for all human beings across time and across cultures—this dilemma is simply of no concern to me.5

Of course, this is far from the only difficulty with which I will be presented in my efforts here at comparative philosophy. As a first step toward establishing connections between Eastern and Western traditions of perfectionism, it is encouraging to be able to note that I am by no means the first scholar to have recognized a perfectionist ethos at the core of Confucianism. Wing-Tsit Chan, for example, has discussed how Confucius “believed in the perfectibility of all men” (Chan, 1963, p. 15) and how he modified the traditional concept of the junzi (君子), or the “superior man,” to denote “the perfect man” (Chan, 1963, p. 16).6 In a similar vein, Daniel Gardner understands the Confucian conception of the superior man as “the designation for a person of perfected virtue” (Gardner, 2003, p. 32). And Louden has asserted explicitly and unequivocally that “Confucius’ ethics is perfectionist” (Louden, 2002, p. 85). Encouraging though comments such as these are, insofar as they indicate a certain degree of similarity between the Eastern and Western traditions, the question remains: Is it a significant degree to which Confucianism is a perfectionist philosophy? More to the point, is the degree to which Confucianism is a perfectionist philosophy significant enough to prove that my conviction that Lee’s philosophy is in many important respects consistent with Confucianism has merit? To answer this question, I will have to explore in greater detail key concepts and principles in Confucianism that are manifest in the Western perfectionist tradition and in Lee’s perfectionist philosophy.

The first concept to which I would like to draw attention is the concept of character. In Confucianism, as in the Western perfectionist tradition, character is what James F. Peterman calls (borrowing his terminology from Ludwig Wittgenstein) a “bedrock concept” (Peterman, 2015). Indeed, the Confucian superior man is superior in character; as Amy Olberding (2014b) states in no uncertain terms, the Analects “functions as a moral manual” intended to inspire and educate readers in the cultivation of their characters (p. 199), for, as Confucius maintained, it is a strong moral character that allows individuals to find and follow the “Way.”7 With respect to the twin difficulties of finding and following the Way, it is written in the Analects that, “The Master said, ‘Without Goodness, one cannot remain constant in adversity and cannot enjoy enduring happiness. Those who are Good feel at home in Goodness’” (4.2, p. 29). The ancient Confucian scholar Kong Anguo elaborated on this analect by acknowledging that “some cannot remain constant in adversity because sustained adversity motivates them to do wrong,” while others “cannot enjoy enduring happiness because they inevitably fall into arrogance and sloth” (Kong, in Slingerland, 2003, p. 30). In short, doing good is good, but being good is better, and the mark of one’s goodness is one’s character. This emphasis on character is present equally in the Western perfectionist tradition. To Cavell’s mind, Aristotle, with his observation in the Nicomachean Ethics that “we are insofar as we are actualized, since we are insofar as we live and act” (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1995b, p. 426), inaugurated the Western perfectionist tradition; in Cavell’s words, Aristotle “put the general issue of perfectionism more strongly, [and] with deeper reference to what is central in
philosophizing at large,” than any other philosopher before him (Cavell, 2004, p. 313). Having in mind the objection that I acknowledged at the beginning of this section vis-à-vis comparative philosophy, namely the danger of obliterating the nuances of different philosophical traditions or reducing one philosophical tradition to another in the quest to uncover similarity/sameness, it is worth elaborating on the precise positions from which Confucius and Aristotle make their (similar yet distinct) arguments.

In both the Eastern and the Western traditions, character is a bedrock concept. With regards to the cultivation of character, however, there are some important differences between these traditions. In the Confucian tradition (implicitly in the teachings of Confucius and explicitly in the teachings of Mencius), all individuals are inherently good. It is not so much a question of learning how to be good; it is more a matter of cultivating one’s “inner goodness.” This comes through in the Confucian emphasis on the concept of Tian (天), or “Heaven,” defined by Chan as “the supreme spiritual reality” (Chan, 1963, p. 4); implicit in the Analects and explicit in the Book of Mencius is the idea that “goodness” is endowed in all humans and that one’s empyrean task is to follow “Heaven’s Mandate” (tianming (天命)) and accord oneself with the Way, which, on these terms, can be understood as the Way of Heaven (tiandao (天道)).

Notwithstanding the “how” question with respect to such notions as mandates from Heaven and Heavenly endowments of goodness—namely how such notions are conceivable in the absence of a theological/creationist metaphysics—the key insight is that, in a distinctly perfectionist register, a presupposition of the Confucian tradition is that the cultivation of a strong moral character, which is a prerequisite to self-actualization, is volitional. The Confucian quest to become a junzi, the Aristotelian quest to become a phrónimos (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1995a, pp. 3718-4009), the Emersonian quest to become an “Over-Soul” (Emerson, 1841/1950b), Lee’s quest “toward personal liberation,”9 these quests are all a matter of choice—it is precisely a choice that one has to make (the consequences of which one must also take responsibility for), based on one’s own values and one’s own judgments, whether or not to cultivate one’s character, to actualize oneself, to walk the path toward, in Emerson’s (1841/1950a) characteristically eloquent phrasing, one’s “unattained but attainable self” (p. 125). At this point, a different “how” question arises: How does one cultivate a strong moral character? That is, how does one exercise one’s volition toward the goal of self-actualization?

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle provides an answer to this question, and his answer is in different respects analogous and antithetical to Confucianism. In the perfectionist traditions of both East and West, there appears the presupposition of something akin to a positively reinforcing “virtue loop”: In order to be good, one must (want to) do good, and it is by doing (and wanting to do) good that one becomes good. Character, then, at least on this picture, is the fulcrum on which the superior man turns in his pursuit of his unattained but attainable self. In corroboration, consider, in the Analects, the following exchange:

Ran Qiu said, “It is not that I do not delight in your Way, Master, it is simply that my strength is insufficient.” The Master said, “Someone whose strength is genuinely insufficient collapses somewhere along the Way. As for you, you deliberately draw the line.” (6.12, p. 56)

In this exchange, Ran Qiu implies that he wants to do/be good but just is not strong enough—that is, he blames Heaven for not endowing him with the requisite strength of character and seeks to be absolved of his responsibility to cultivate his character—while Confucius retorts that if he sincerely wanted to do/be good then he would accept doing/being nothing less. This exchange
brings to light a point of contention in the Confucian tradition vis-à-vis the “chronology” of learning, that is, whether the “investigation of things” (gewu 格物) is prerequisite to/results in “sincerity of the will” (cheng 诚) or vice versa (see Chan, 1963, pp. 84-85). To my mind, the Analects consistently promotes the idea that sincerity of the will is paramount (e.g. 1.8 (pp. 3-4), 4.4 (p. 30), and 15.6 (pp. 176-177)). Aristotle was on the same page, although, with reference to what I alluded to earlier as a virtue loop, it was Aristotle’s position that sincerity of the will must be learned, or, more specifically, habituated. In the Nicomachean Ethics, he deploys the concept of hexis (ἕξις), which denotes the stability of one’s character over time, and argues that “excellences we get by first exercising them . . . e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so, too, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1995a, p. 3747).

In sum, while the Eastern and Western traditions of perfectionism may diverge with reference to the concept of nature (vis-à-vis theological/creationist metaphysics vs naturalist/evolutionary metaphysics), they do accord with reference to the issue of “nature-versus-nurture”: It is ultimately of little consequence whether individuals must learn how to be good or must learn how to cultivate their inner goodness, for, at the end of the day, neither tradition countenances a notion of automatic goodness. As it is famously stated in the Analects: “The Master said, ‘By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice’” (17.2, p. 200).10 No individuals are automatically good, nor does merely wishing to be good automatically make one good, nor does having once been/done good automatically ensure one’s forever being/doing good; in both the Eastern and the Western traditions, the choices that an individual makes and the reasons for his choices determine his qualification for being either junzi/superior or xiaoren (小人)/inferior, while one’s being either junzi or xiaoren determines whether finding and following the Way will be easy or difficult. As this sentiment is eloquently expressed by Charlene Tan:

A junzi has not [acquired] ren [仁, ‘goodness’] because ren . . . is a virtue that one progressively acquires through a lifelong process of self-cultivation . . . An analogy would be that of an Olympic gold medalist. Her medal attests to her high level of competency in her sport, but . . . there remains [the] possibility that she may not win another gold medal in the next Olympic games due to a lapse in performance, or due to the relatively higher standards of her competitors, [etc.] . . . The uncertainty of winning a gold medal the second time means she needs to keep up her training and not rest on her laurels. In the same vein, [acquiring] ren is not a one-off achievement but a lifelong journey. (Tan, 2013, pp. 113-114)11

It goes without saying that there is far more that could—and should—be said about the connections between the perfectionist traditions of East and West, but, for my purposes here, this elucidation of the connections with reference to character, volition, and self-actualization will have to suffice. While there are myriad issues and questions worth considering in light of the preceding, the question that I will consider in what remains of this essay involves an issue that was touched on by Aristotle but that was far more explicitly considered by Confucius: How does one learn—and, regarding one who wants to learn, how does one teach such a one—not merely to find and follow the Way but to become a junzi, or a phrónimos, or an Over-Soul? In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle rightly observed that a notion of automatic goodness would preclude the “need of a teacher” (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1995a, p. 3747); however, since cultivating character is not an automatic process and since volition is a prerequisite to self-actualization, teaching takes on considerable importance. But what kind of learning and teaching are required? By way of exploring the principles of learning and teaching shared between the perfectionist traditions of East and
West—and, at the same time, cementing his perfectionist position between the two—I will attempt to answer this final question by turning to the media pedagogy of Bruce Lee.

**Lessons of the dragon**

In his groundbreaking work on Bruce Lee’s many legacies, Paul Bowman (2010, 2013) has stated plainly that “no consideration of Bruce Lee . . . can overlook his importance as a muse, an inspiration, and an educator” (Bowman, 2013, p. 65). Yet, as he rightly acknowledged, “many academics who have sought to study Bruce Lee . . . have overwhelmingly overlooked the fact that Bruce Lee—**himself**—actually **sought** to teach at all . . . have overlooked *that* he sought to teach and *what* he sought to teach” (Bowman, 2013, p. 67). From this position, I will analyze in this section Lee’s role in the episode of the American television series *Longstreet* entitled “The Way of the Intercepting Fist” (which, of course, is the English translation of Jeet Kune Do) and explore *what* he sought to teach as well as, and perhaps even more importantly, *how* he sought to teach. Although I will not be discussing *Longstreet* in a historical or biographical context (cf. Polly, 2018, pp. 281-288), there are two interesting facts that deserve comment at the outset in as much as they shine a light on the uniqueness of *Longstreet* in its capacity to serve as a document both of the process of Lee teaching and the process of learning from Lee. First, Lee’s appearance on *Longstreet* coincided with the publication of his essay “Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate” in 1971. This is significant because it marked the point in time when Lee felt comfortable enough with his formulation of Jeet Kune Do to move from developing and articulating it on a small scale to teaching it on a mass media scale. Second, the writer on *Longstreet* with whom Lee worked was Stirling Silliphant, one of Lee’s many real-life Hollywood martial arts students. This is significant because, despite Lee not writing all his lines of dialogue himself, it is nevertheless possible to consider Lee the author of this episode, for, as Silliphant himself admitted: “What I did was simply to take many of the things Bruce had taught me and put them into the script” (Silliphant, in Polly, 2018, p. 283).

The plot of “The Way of the Intercepting Fist” features the titular character Mike Longstreet (James Franciscus), a blind insurance investigator, seeking the help of Lee’s character, an antiques dealer named Li Tsung, during an investigation into a series of hijackings that have occurred on the local docks. Longstreet runs afoul of some crooked dockworkers and finds himself in need of self-defense training, and, naturally, after being saved from three hired goons by Li and his incredible fighting prowess, he asks Li to prepare him for the inevitable showdown. Interspersed within training sessions involving kicking and footwork drills, Li goes beyond merely training Longstreet’s body and attempts to train his mind, as well. Initially, however, Li is not thrilled at the idea of teaching Longstreet at all. When Longstreet approaches Li at his antique shop and asks him why he does not want to train him, Li explains: “I don’t believe in system, Mr. Longstreet, nor in method, and without system, without method, what’s to teach?” On the one hand, this line is koan-esque paradox-speak meant to dissuade the nonserious. On the other hand, it captures the importance of introspection and self-directedness in learning. Consider, in the Confucian context, the following two passages from the *Analects*:

The Master said, “I should just give up! I have yet to meet someone who is able to perceive his own faults and then take himself to task inwardly.” (5.27, p. 51)

The Master said, “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem,
Discernible in the above is both a wariness, which is likewise discernible in Li’s wariness in response to Longstreet’s *claim* to seriously want to learn from him, as well as a condition of teaching: In a profoundly Confucian gesture, Li will only teach Longstreet on the condition that Longstreet contributes equally to the process. As Edward Slingerland observes, the ideal Confucian student “should come to [learn] possessed by an inchoate need for what study is able to provide—something like [a] passion for learning” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 66). Li is testing Longstreet in this exchange to determine what kind of student he will be, to determine whether he will be a student *worth* teaching. Longstreet, for his part, does not miss a beat. In response to Li’s remark about not believing in system nor in method, he retorts (in an Aristotelian vein): “But you had to learn. You weren’t born knowing how to take apart three men in a matter of seconds.” Li then replies: “True, but I found the cause of my ignorance.” Longstreet then asks Li, with the requisite sincerity: “Help me find mine.”

Satisfied of Longstreet’s seriousness, Li agrees to teach him. During their first training session, Longstreet explains to the character Duke Paige (Peter Mark Richman) that Li is teaching him his martial art of Jeet Kune Do, but Li interjects and clarifies: “I cannot ‘teach’ you, only help you to explore yourself, nothing more.” Anticipating Lee’s famous “fighting without fighting” line from *Enter the Dragon* (1973), it appears that in this sequence, pleased with Longstreet’s progress, Li decides to peel yet another layer of the Jeet Kune Do onion in an effort to get Longstreet to realize that the process of learning is less about him “emptying his cup” just to have Li pour in his own tea, as if no work is required on Longstreet’s part, and more about him looking inward and identifying his own weaknesses and shortcomings (in short, finding the cause of his ignorance). For Lee’s part, he wrote in “Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate” that a good teacher is never a giver of the truth but a pointer to the truth, which “the student must discover for himself” (Lee, 1971a, p. 27). In addition to demonstrating Lee’s kinship with Western philosophy, this mode of “teaching without teaching” also brings to light a Confucian conception of learning that does not necessarily adhere to a linear, step-by-step, 1+2=3 equation. On this ostensibly paradoxical point, Gardner is most eloquent:

> [Confucius,] assuming that people are capable of understanding the Way . . . tries to elucidate it for them through his teaching, only to discover that they cannot be *made* to understand it. They can indeed be made to *comply* with it, but understanding it, the possibility of which he believes is open to them, is *more their own doing*. As [Zhu Xi] puts it succinctly elsewhere: “To be incapable of *making* them understand it is not the same as not *having* them understand it.” (Gardner, 2003, p. 156, emphasis added)

Li faces this exact dilemma with Longstreet. During a particularly intense training session, Li realizes that Longstreet has hit on a “sticking point,” or an “impasse,” to borrow from the terminology of the German psychotherapist Fritz Perls, one of the most profound influences on Lee during the time that he spent studying philosophy and psychology. In his notes, Lee transcribed the following from Perls on transcending sticking points in psychotherapy and it aligns significantly with Gardner’s expliciation of the Confucian “teaching without teaching” paradox:

> The basic phobic attitude is to be afraid to be what you are. And you will find relief immediately if you dare to investigate what you are like . . . If we get behind the phobic state [then] we find at that moment
the impasse occurs . . . In every bit of therapy, we have to go through this implosive layer in order to get to the authentic self . . . Once we get through the implosive layer . . . explosions happen. The explosion is the final neurotic layer that occurs when we get through the implosive state. As I see it, this progression is necessary to become authentic. There are essentially four types of explosion: explosion into joy, into grief, into orgasm, into anger. (Perls, in Lee, n.d., p. 87)

Li may not be able to make Longstreet understand, he may not be able to give him understanding, but he can guide him through his own thought processes, through the “implosive layer” of his psyche, and have him understand. And that is exactly what he does. In an effort to get behind Longstreet’s “phobic state,” Li guides him through his “implosive layer” and, sure enough, an explosion happens. Flustered by the escalating intensity of the training session, as well as incensed by Li’s disparaging remark about how Longstreet’s “thoughts are wrong,” Longstreet exclaims: “I’m trying to learn how to fight, not how to think!” Significantly, Li smiles after Longstreet’s outburst and leaves, ostensibly terminating their relationship. Longstreet, of course, is crestfallen; he thinks that he has committed an egregious transgression. But Li knows that he has made significant progress with Longstreet, and he recognizes Longstreet’s explosion as the precise moment for him to leave and allow Longstreet to journey inward. As he explains to Longstreet’s assistant Nikki (Marlyn Mason) by way of a twist on a Zen koan attributed to Mizuta Masahide: “His warehouse having burned down, nothing obscures his view of the bright moon.”

Later in the episode, presumably after having spent time gazing up at the bright moon, Longstreet returns to Li’s antique shop to ask if they could resume their training. Again, Li tests him, and again, Longstreet passes; he explains to Li that, despite his anger and frustration, “there were a couple of times there when you were teaching me that I felt that my body and head really were together,” which, of course, marks for Lee the highest mode of combative being. Here, Li is testing Longstreet’s understanding—indeed, he forces Longstreet, unbeknownst to himself, to demonstrate his understanding of Jeet Kune Do. Li jokingly asks him if he always knows the right thing to say, which Longstreet answers with his own innocent question: “Have I said it?” As Lee wrote in an essay of his entitled “The Ultimate Source of Jeet Kune Do,” the goal of a teacher is “to bring [the student’s] mind into sharp focus and to make it alert so that it can immediately intuit truth”; having transcended his impasse and having exploded through his implosive layer, Longstreet is now in a state of innocent awareness and genuine understanding, “emancipated from old habits, prejudices, restrictive thought process[es], and even ordinary thought itself” (Lee, 1971b, p. 199).

In the remainder of the episode, Li continues to drill techniques with Longstreet ahead of his fight, and their training concludes on the eve of the fight with Lee’s famous “Be water” monologue and his injunction to “learn the art of dying” in order to be liberated from the fear of death/defeat. Longstreet emerging victorious in the showdown at the end of the episode may seem like cheap dramatic convention, but its uniqueness stems from the fact that, rather than marking the end of Longstreet’s perfectionist journey, it marks its beginning. Ultimately, Lee’s perfectionist pedagogy, with its many Confucian affinities, brings back into the foreground an ancient conception of learning; as Mao Qiling and Cheng Shude averred, “people today think of ‘learning’ as the pursuit of knowledge, whereas the ancients thought of ‘learning’ as cultivating the self” (Cheng, in Slingerland, 2003, p. 1). Longstreet’s conflict with the dockworkers may have been resolved—that is, he may have “learned” what he needed to learn to resolve that particular issue—but what he learned ended up transcending the docks. Thanks to Li’s guidance, which Longstreet reflects on at the end of the episode and which he articulates as “drinking tea from an empty cup,” he learned
more than how to fight—he learned how to think and how to live. In short, he found the cause of his ignorance, and, in so doing, found the Way.

**Conclusion**

In the previous section, I noted the significance of the year 1971 in the life of Bruce Lee and explained that his appearance on *Longstreet* coincided with the publication of his epochal essay “Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate.” Those were not the only noteworthy occurrences of 1971, however. That was also the year that Lee closed his martial arts schools and, after spending over a decade as a martial arts instructor, ceased teaching martial arts. At first glance, this confluence of events may appear to indicate that, upon hitting it big in Hollywood, Lee could no longer be bothered wasting his time teaching martial arts. The truth of the matter is that 1971 was the year that Lee opted to take his teaching from out of schools and put it on the screen. In conversation with his friend and training partner Dan Inosanto, Lee explained that the screen represented to him the ultimate teaching platform, and he was driven to new heights of ambition when he realized that with a single film or television show he could reach more people and change more lives than he could in a lifetime spent in schools and at demonstrations (see Inosanto, 2006). As it turned out, he was right.

In her landmark essay entitled “Learning from Bruce Lee,” Meaghan Morris brilliantly captured the pedagogical function/status of Bruce Lee, who she explained offered himself to audiences via his film and television characters as an “aesthetically shaped [but] ethically practical ideal” (Morris, 2001, p. 174). For a time, I was considering titling this essay “Still Learning from Bruce Lee,” but I opted not to when I was unable to settle for myself whether that title would be a statement or a question. To echo James Bishop, who once lamented the fact that so many people “miss even [Lee’s] most obvious lessons” (Bishop, 2004, p. 170), I firmly believe that there are myriad lessons of the Dragon that remain to be learned, but, with a certain sense of Confucian resignation, I am less certain of whether people are capable of actually learning from Bruce Lee. In the introduction to his translation of the *Analects*, Slingerland discusses Confucius’ exasperation at the fact that teaching is so difficult:

> The Master sighed, “Would that I did not have to speak!” Zigong said, “If the Master did not speak, then how would we little ones receive guidance from you?” The Master replied, “What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons are put in motion by it, and the myriad creatures receive their life from it. What does Heaven ever say?” (17.19, p. 208)

Slingerland argues that, for Confucius, “in the ideal state of harmony,” if a teacher had “rectified his person” then “the world became ordered of its own accord.” This “idealized vision,” Slingerland contends, served as Confucius’ “benchmark” and motivated his “need to ’speak’—that is, to teach, cajole, admonish.” *Pace* Slingerland, the teachings of Confucius are “a necessary evil” meant to serve as a “wake-up call” (Slingerland, 2003, p. xxi) to all who have failed to acknowledge that, as the 12th century Confucianist Hong Xingzi provocatively puts it, “it is not that the Way is distant from man; it is that man distances himself from the Way” (Hong, in Gardner, 2003, p. 129). Evident here in the Confucian tradition is the “pattern of disappointment and desire” that Cavell found to be so common that he conceived of it as “the moral calling of philosophy” and termed it perfectionism. But, Cavell wondered, “if the world is disappointing and the world is malleable and hence we feel ourselves called upon for change, where does change begin” (Cavell, 2004, p. 2)? I am inspired by Bruce Lee to answer: Change begins with an empty cup.
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Notes
1. For a more elaborate discussion of Bruce Lee and perfectionism based on my presentation, see Barrowman (2019).
2. For merely a choice example to counter Bolelli’s hyperbole, in The Tao of Giung Fu, Lee not only references Confucius (Lee, 1963/1997, pp. 121, 140), he quotes him directly (Lee, 1963/1997, pp. 120-121).
3. In fairness to Polly, even though I have “strategically” quoted him in a manner that evidently puts him in the same “anti-Confucianism/pro-Daoism” camp as Bolelli, Polly demonstrates a far more nuanced understanding of Lee’s piecemeal dealings with philosophy and, more specifically, of what Lee found appealing in/about Daoism in particular. As Polly explains: “[Lee] became interested in Taoism, the ancient Chinese philosophy that focuses on being one with nature, going with the flow, bending like a reed in the wind . . . [because, among other reasons,] he was self-aware enough to realize many of his [psychological/emotional/interpersonal] problems were the result of his need to be in control, to assert his will. He was a dragon, a fire element—his anger burning those around him. Taoism [thus] served as a psychological self-corrective, water to douse the flames” (Polly, 2018, p. 76).
4. For general reference, all quotes herein from the Analects have been taken from Edward Slingerland (2003) and all quotes herein from the Book of Mencius have been taken from Wing-Tsit Chan (1963). Citations will refer to original numberings followed by the corresponding page numbers in the sources from which they were obtained.
5. Nor, interestingly, has this dilemma ever been of concern to the perfectionist thinkers of the Eastern and Western traditions. Consider as corroboration the following remarks, the first from the 12th century Confucianist Lu Hsiang-Shan and the second from the 19th Century Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. First, from Lu: “There is only one mind. My mind, my friend’s mind, the mind of the sages thousands of years ago, and the mind of sages thousands of years to come are all the same . . . To acquire learning is to appreciate this fact” (Lu, in Chan, 1963, p. 585). Second, from Emerson (Emerson, 1841/1950b): “The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth—they accept it thankfully everywhere and do not label or stamp it with any man’s name, for it is theirs long beforehand and from eternity” (pp. 267-268).
6. It is worth mentioning here that, in what follows, I will take junzi to be akin to the phrónimos in Aristotle (cf. Aristotle, 350 BCE/1995a, pp. 3718-4009; see also Khan, 2005, pp. 39-53 and Sim, 2007, pp. 23-48) and the “Over-Soul” in Emerson (cf. Emerson, 1841/1950b) as the concept that denotes the Confucian ideal. Although I will not engage in terminological quibbling vis-à-vis junzi versus renzhe (仁者) versus the ever-elusive “sage,” for those interested in this question of terminology regarding the Confucian ideal, see, among others, Chan (1963), Lo (1999), Van Norden (2002), Gardner (2003), Watson (2007), Tan (2013), and Lai (2014).
7. Obviously, the concept of the “Way” (Dao or Tao (道)) is a bedrock concept in both Confucianism and Daoism. For more elaborate discussions of this concept and its centrality in Confucianism, see, in particular, Chan (1963), Slingerland (2003), Gardner (2003), and Tan (2013).
8. If, for Cavell, Aristotle represents the inauguration of the Western perfectionist tradition, then Emerson represents its crystallization (see Cavell, 1990, 2003, 2004) And, for his part, Emerson (1844/1950a) devoted an entire essay to the notion of character.

9. Prior to the publication of his essay “Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate,” Lee wrote several rough drafts, eight of which he titled “Jeet Kune Do—Toward Personal Liberation” (see Lee, in Little, 1999, pp. 122-181).

10. For more analects involving volition, see 1.4 (p. 2), 4.17 (p. 35), 6.22 (p. 60), 7.34 (p. 75), 9.17 (p. 92), 9.19 (p. 93), and 9.24 (pp. 95-96).

11. For more on perfectionism as not a fixed destination in life but as a way of comporting oneself through life, see Emerson (1844/1950b), Rand (1957, [1943] 1968), Cavell, (1990, 2003, 2004) and (Barrowman, 2018, 2019). Also, for analects in this vein, see 6.7 (p. 55), 9.17 (p. 92), 9.19 (p. 93), and 9.21 (p. 94).

12. Given the comparatively limited scope of this essay, I will not discuss in any kind of detail the many facets of Lee’s media pedagogy. Instead, I will focus rather narrowly on the aspects of teaching and learning foregrounded in his late television work. However, for a sense of what a detailed discussion of the many facets of Lee’s media pedagogy would amount to, see the work of Bowman (2010, 2013) and Morris (2001), to which my overall sense of Lee’s media pedagogy is indebted.

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