Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Fundamentals (ISSN: 2748-9345)

Received: 25 September 2026 | Accepted: 22 October 2026 | Published: 19 November 2026

DOI: 10.55640/jsshrf-06-11-05

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conscience and Responsibility in Eastern Ethical Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation

Furkat Jurakulov Noryigitovich

Professor, DSc, International Islamic Studies Academy of Uzbekistan

VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue11 2026

PAGE: 27-31

Copyright © 2026 Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Fundamentals, this is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License. Licensed under Creative Commons License a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Abstract

This article examines how conscience and moral responsibility can be interpreted through selected works of early Confucian and medieval Islamic ethical thought. It compares the Analects and the Mengzi with al-Ghazali's writings on moral cultivation and al-Farabi's political philosophy. The term conscience is used as a comparative category for practices through which people examine motives, recognize moral demands, and judge their conduct. The analysis distinguishes moral perception, self-examination, and answerability, then considers how each depends on habits, relationships, and institutions. In the Confucian texts, morally significant emotions and socially cultivated judgment help people respond to duties arising from relationships. Al-Ghazali situates self-examination within accountability before God, while al-Farabi shows how political arrangements shape the acquisition and exercise of virtue. The article argues that conscience becomes a basis for responsible action when an agent can examine motives, consider obligations to others, and act on a judgment that may have personal costs.

KEYWORDS

Conscience, moral responsibility, moral cultivation, Confucian ethics, al-Ghazali, al-Farabi, virtue.

INTRODUCTION

A person may comply with a rule because it is just, because it is customary, or because breaking it might bring punishment. The external action can look identical in all three instances. The difference becomes clearer when the rule is poorly applied and an authority figure expects silence. What allows a person to recognize a responsibility in that situation, and what makes the resulting judgment worthy of trust? These questions connect the study of conscience to the conditions under which people learn to judge and answer for their actions.

This article develops a comparison between two historically distinct intellectual settings. Early Confucian texts provide accounts of moral emotion, exemplary conduct, and obligations within relationships. Al-Ghazali describes disciplined attention to the soul and its motives, while al-Farabi examines the role of political society in realizing human excellence. Their works offer different answers to the question of how inward judgment becomes visible in conduct. The comparison assesses those answers through a common set of ethical questions while retaining each author's understanding of virtue and its purpose.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The analysis uses close reading and comparative interpretation. It examines passages on moral education, reflective judgment, and duties to others in the Analects and

the Mengzi, Books XXII and XXXVIII of al-Ghazali's Revival of the Religious Sciences, and selected political writings of al-Farabi. The Confucian passages are identified by book and passage numbers, which allows readers to consult different translations. The discussion of the Islamic texts identifies the relevant works and their place within each author's broader project. The selection supports a focused philosophical comparison of two traditions within the much wider field called Eastern ethical thought.

Conscience is used here as a term for the capacity to examine one's motives and conduct in light of moral demands. A passing feeling of unease can prompt examination, but the result still calls for judgment. Someone who feels embarrassed after challenging unfair treatment may have violated a social expectation while fulfilling a moral obligation. Someone who feels entirely comfortable may have overlooked another person's vulnerability. The analytic distinction between feeling and judgment helps the comparison account for both moral sensitivity and the possibility that such sensitivity has been shaped by unjust circumstances.

Moral responsibility has a forward-looking dimension, which concerns what a person should attend to and do, and a retrospective dimension, which concerns how that person should answer for a completed action. In a relationship of trust, a person may have a duty to ask about a foreseeable problem before it occurs. Afterward, the same person may have a duty to acknowledge an error, explain what happened, and take action to repair the harm. Identifying both dimensions helps connect inward moral reflection to practical conduct.

Three questions guide the reading. What makes a morally significant feature of a situation visible to the agent? How can the agent examine a motive or revise an initial judgment? To whom, and for what, is that agent answerable? These questions organize the comparison without forcing a shared vocabulary onto the texts. The term xin, commonly rendered as heart-mind, includes affective and cognitive activity in early Chinese philosophy. Al-Ghazali's analysis of the soul's discipline and self-examination operates within a different account of human nature and religion. Al-Farabi's political writings address the social conditions of virtue and give the comparison a way to consider responsibilities exercised through institutions.

Moral Perception in the Confucian Tradition

The Analects presents moral formation through practices that include learning, observation, ritual, and reflection. In Analects 2.3, Confucius considers the effects of two ways of governing. Punishment can make people attentive to sanctions, while exemplary virtue and ritual can foster a sense of shame and encourage self-correction (Confucius, 2003). The passage identifies a civic consequence of moral education. When people can judge their own conduct, the maintenance of social order depends in part on standards they have learned to apply to themselves. The quality of the examples and practices through which those standards are taught therefore matters.

Analects 4.18 introduces a difficulty that arises within a valued relationship. A child may find reason to remonstrate with a parent and is expected to do so gently. The passage also places limits on how disagreement is expressed and gives continuing weight to respect (Confucius, 2003). It is philosophically significant because it locates disagreement within the exercise of a duty. The relationship gives the child a reason to pay attention to the parent's conduct and provides a standard for expressing concern. The passage leaves open harder questions about how to respond when deference would expose someone to grave harm. Its immediate contribution is to show that ethical attention includes the manner in which a concern is raised.

The Mengzi gives moral perception a more explicit psychological basis. In the example of a child about to fall into a well, the observer's alarm and compassion reveal an immediate responsiveness to another person's danger (Mengzi, 2008, 2A6). The passage treats compassion and other morally significant responses as beginnings of virtues that require development. The response to imminent danger can be strong, while concern for people whose suffering is distant might be weak. Cultivation involves extending attention across situations where the reasons for concern are similar but less evident.

Reflection also matters. Passage 6A15 (Mengzi, 2008) connects the capacity to reflect with the task of ordering one's

concerns. An agent may feel an attraction to advantage and still recognize a duty that deserves greater weight. Read alongside the example of the child, the passage suggests two stages of conscience. A morally relevant feature first becomes visible, and attention then allows a judgment to be formed and extended. This helps explain why emotional sensitivity can be a source of moral knowledge and still require education (Van Norden, 2024).

Self-Examination and Answerability in al-Ghazali

In Book XXII of The Revival of the Religious Sciences, al-Ghazali discusses the formation of character through the discipline of the soul. Repeated action matters because a practice can stabilize a disposition that was initially difficult to sustain. A person learning generosity, for instance, may need to practice giving before generosity becomes a settled tendency. Al-Ghazali relates this process to the ordering of desire and anger and to the ethical guidance of revelation (al-Ghazali, 1995). Moral education includes the conditions under which a person learns to notice an impulse and govern the action that might follow from it.

Book XXXVIII develops the link between vigilance and self-examination. Muraqaba involves sustained awareness of one's actions and inner state under divine observation. Muhasaba involves taking account of conduct and attending to discrepancies between an obligation and one's performance of it (al-Ghazali, 2015). Together, the practices cover distinct moments of ethical work. A person may scrutinize an intended action before pursuing it, pay attention to motives as the action unfolds, and later ask where attention or discipline failed. The practice of review matters most when it changes what the person will do in another encounter.

The concern with intention makes a difference to how responsible action is understood. A person can give publicly to secure recognition while appearing to act from care for the recipient. A sincere motive can also accompany a poorly considered decision. Examining the motive addresses one part of responsibility, while considering what another person actually needs addresses another. The distinction helps explain why reflection on the self can deepen a person's awareness of duties that have a social dimension.

Al-Ghazali's account gives self-examination a theological orientation. Accountability before God provides a reason to attend to conduct that escapes public notice, including intentions concealed by prestigious or apparently charitable acts. This orientation also places a demand on the credibility of the agent's own favorable interpretation. The possibility of self-deception gives someone a reason to review recurring habits and to take criticism seriously. Compared with the early Confucian discussion, this treatment devotes particular attention to the agent's awareness before God and to disciplined review over time. In both settings, reflection becomes ethically consequential when it leads the agent to correct a practice or respond to an obligation that was previously neglected.

Virtue and Political Responsibility in al-Farabi

Al-Farabi's political philosophy links individual excellence with the purposes of an organized community. In the Book of Religion and Selected Aphorisms, he develops an account of political guidance in which practices and institutions can cultivate dispositions relevant to human happiness (al-Farabi, 2001). His conception of happiness refers to human perfection and gives intellectual excellence an important place. Cooperation matters because people depend on others to secure the conditions in which many capacities can develop. From this point of view, the ethical quality of a community depends partly on the ends toward which it directs shared action.

For this article, al-Farabi's contribution is to clarify how people with power over education and public practice participate in the formation of judgment. Consider an institution that praises fairness but regularly rewards officials for overlooking misconduct. The incentive may teach people that silence is prudent and that speaking up will achieve little. A person may still recognize unfairness and take responsibility for a response. The institution nevertheless shapes which examples are admired, which actions are rewarded, and which alternatives appear practicable. Treating those conditions as ethically significant follows from the political dimension of virtue, even though the example is contemporary.

This argument poses a question about the quality of political

guidance. If a leader can shape beliefs and habits, what standard should be used to assess the use of that power? In al-Farabi's account, the end of political guidance is genuine happiness, and an evaluation of rule depends on the end pursued by its arrangements. The account gives considerable weight to the competence and orientation of the ruler. A contemporary interpretation can retain the insight that political arrangements form character while asking how people can raise concerns when leaders mistake their own interests for a shared good.

Al-Farabi's perspective also helps explain why roles carry different responsibilities. A person with authority to set a rule or offer a remedy has options that another participant may lack. That difference matters when evaluating conduct. An official able to revise an unfair procedure bears a responsibility that extends beyond personal honesty, while a colleague who encounters the procedure may have reason to alert those with authority to intervene. Relating the scope of a duty to the power attached to a role connects individual moral reflection with responsibility for the organization of common life.

Conscience and Responsibility in Comparative Perspective

The texts suggest a sequence linking perception, examination, and response. The first step is to notice an ethical feature, such as another person's need or a conflict of duties. The second is to examine how fear, loyalty, or ambition may affect the judgment. The third is to do something that answers to the obligation identified. The Confucian examples clarify how perception can develop within relationships. Al-Ghazali's practices illuminate the scrutiny of motives over time. Al-Farabi gives an account of the institutional conditions that make responsible action easier or harder to sustain. Each contribution addresses a distinct problem within the same sequence.

Consider a hypothetical university committee whose member notices that a colleague has overlooked evidence relevant to selecting a scholarship recipient. The early Confucian discussion of remonstrance directs attention to how the member can speak respectfully while taking the concern seriously. Al-Ghazali's account of self-examination suggests asking whether hesitation arises from uncertainty about the evidence or from a desire to protect a friendship. Al-Farabi's attention to political formation prompts a further question about the committee's procedures. How should it protect the integrity of its decision when its members have ties to one another? The person's responsibility may involve checking the material, raising the issue promptly, and giving those with decision-making authority an opportunity to correct the record.

The example also clarifies how established relationships can both educate judgment and introduce bias. Loyalty can lead a person to see needs that others overlook. It can also narrow attention when a person with no influential ties is affected. A responsible judgment should therefore consider the reasons that support an action and whether those reasons can be maintained when the roles in the case are exchanged. In the scholarship example, the committee might ask whether it would accept the same treatment of evidence if the candidate were supported by a different colleague. This question is an extension of the comparison into institutional practice, where decisions affect people beyond the immediate circle of relationships.

The term conscience can accordingly designate an activity involving others even when the initial experience of judgment is inward. It can involve listening to a criticism, recognizing a failure of attention, and revising a decision. Responsibility makes the resulting judgment visible through a response to the people or duties at stake. That response may require explanation, correction, or action under uncertainty. The standard of evaluation is tied to the reasons available to the agent and to the scope of the agent's power.

CONCLUSION

This comparison interprets conscience as a cultivated capacity to recognize moral demands, examine motives, and revise judgments. Early Confucian texts describe moral perception as responsive to the needs of others and refined through reflection, example, and practice. Al-Ghazali connects the scrutiny of intention to sustained self-examination and accountability before God. Al-Farabi shows how political and educational arrangements supply conditions under which the

virtues can develop and be exercised. Their accounts give different grounds for moral judgment and make it possible to examine the interaction between character and social organization.

The study finds that responsible action has a prospective dimension of attending to duties and a retrospective dimension of answering for decisions. The distinction helps identify a problem in cases where a person notices an obligation but lacks authority to act on it directly. Responsibility in such cases can involve bringing the matter to someone with power to review the decision. It can also involve examining whether the relevant institution gives due attention to the people affected. Conscience thus becomes practically significant through the relationship between reflective judgment and the possibility of correction.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Farabi. (2001). The political writings: Selected aphorisms and other texts (C. E. Butterworth, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
2. Al-Ghazali. (1995). On disciplining the soul and on breaking the two desires (T. J. Winter, Trans.). Islamic Texts Society.
3. Al-Ghazali. (2015). On vigilance and self-examination (A. F. Shaker, Trans.). Islamic Texts Society.
4. Confucius. (2003). Analects: With selections from traditional commentaries (E. Slingerland, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
5. Mengzi. (2008). Mengzi: With selections from traditional commentaries (B. W. Van Norden, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
6. Van Norden, B. W. (2024). Mencius. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/