

RECOVERING A CONFUCIAN CONCEPTION OF HUMAN NATURE: A CHALLENGE TO THE IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALISM

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The understanding of human nature (*renxing* 人性) in the Korean philosophical narrative has its background in and has evolved from the classical Chinese debate on this most fundamental theme. We must go back to this beginning in the *Mencius* in order to appreciate what is persistent and what is distinctive about this idea as it has been revised by Korean philosophers.

In spite of Mencius's rejection of tautological naturalism in 6A3—that is, humans are good because they are good—it is just such an impoverished reading of Mencius—*xing* is an unlearned given that makes us good—that not only persists but in fact prevails among commentators even today. *Xingshan* 性善 is a claim that in the contemporary interpretive literature on Mencius—both Western and Chinese alike—has almost ubiquitously been understood as “human nature is good.” Indeed, the uncritical assumption is that for Mencius *xing* references a universal, inborn, fixed, self-sufficient endowment that is defining of all human beings and that programs us naturally as human beings to be good in what we do.

In this essay, I want to celebrate the attempt by our teacher, colleague, and friend, Angus Graham, to save Mencius from the familiar essentialist misreadings of *xing*—both the discovery and the developmental models—by pointing the commentarial tradition in the direction of a third position. Graham offers us what we would call a “narrative” understanding of *xing* in which person and world evolve together in a dynamic, contrapuntal relationship. The identities of persons are certainly grounded in the native beginnings of family, community, and environing relationships that need to be both nurtured and protected from loss or injury, but such identities only emerge in the process of these relationships achieving thick resolution as they are cultivated, grown, and consummated over their lifetimes. Their potential far from being a given, in fact emerges contrapuntally in the always transactional events that in sum constitute lives lived in the world.

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SETTING THE PROBLEM

The theme of human nature as it has been conceived within the Confucian tradition is not merely of antiquarian interest. In this essay I will argue that in an age beset by the ideology of individualism, the Confucian alternative to this pervasive conception of the liberal, free, autonomous, rational person is perhaps its most important contribution to a changing world cultural order. And yet the Confucian conception of a relationally constituted, interdependent human “becoming” has been buried within its own Confucian traditions, and is currently being overwritten by a concept of the discrete individual grounded in a doctrine of an essential, fixed, universal human nature. In order to recover a Confucian conception of human nature, I will appeal to the classical texts and to their interpretation in our own times by the New Confucian thinker, Tang Junyi to make the argument that this understanding of the Confucian person is alive and well in our contemporary age.

THE PERFECT STORM

We are living in a historical moment of increasing urgency. A perfect storm of global proportions is gathering on the horizon that will immanently threaten our familiar ways of living if not ultimately the very survival of humanity as a species. Ours is a world beset by climate change, by extreme weather events, by an ever accelerating increase in population, by gross income inequities, by food and water shortages, by environmental degradation, by looming pandemics, by energy shortage, by international terrorism, by nuclear proliferation, by consumer waste, and by growing legions of the hopeless poor. Perhaps the most disturbing element in the overall picture is the nearly vertical trajectory in the galloping pace of untoward change.

There seem to be at least four underlying conditions that are defining of this galloping predicament at home and abroad. First, human beings and our way of living in the world are complicit in some immediate and dramatic way for the deepening malaise. Secondly, this predicament does not recognize or respect either national or social boundaries. Crises such as pandemics and climate change have a global reach and affect everyone regardless of nationality or social status. And locally, the ocean was as dark and foreboding for those who were on the first

class deck of the Titanic as it was for those in steerage. Thirdly, there is an organic relationship that obtains among this set of pressing problems, rendering them zero-sum—all or nothing. This means of course that the problems cannot be addressed and solved seriatim by individual players. Rather, we are facing a largely human-precipitated predicament that can only be engaged wholesale by a world and a local community acting in concert to alleviate it. In these pages we will argue that this increasingly dire situation can only be addressed and arrested by effecting a radical, global-scale change in human intentions, values, and practices. And to our shame, perhaps our best hope is that necessity itself rather than any enlightened awareness on the part of the human community will serve as the imperative for change. The fourth and perhaps most important condition is the fact that we probably have the cultural resources available to us to respond effectively to this looming crisis. Indeed, the robust Confucian conception of the relationally constituted human “becoming” as a challenge to the ideology of individualism provides us with a way forward in effecting the change in human values, intentions, and practices that we will need to guarantee a future for the human species. What is further encouraging in this respect is that the ecological consciousness that has emerged over the past generation—what we might call “green” consciousness—is in fundamental ways making a difference at the intersection between human lives lived and the health of the environment.

While this perfect storm has been gathering both globally and locally over the past several decades, at the same time a dramatic reconfiguration of the world’s economic and political order has been occurring that is now affecting us all in this age of global interdependence. Over this past generation, the rise of Confucian Asia has precipitated a sea change in the prevailing economic and political order. Development generally and the global impact of East Asia’s own growth more specifically, is producing a range of changing economic and political patterns that are relatively easy to track. But with Confucian Asia as a dominant player, what about cultural change? What difference does this wholesale reconfiguration of economic and political dominance make for an elite world cultural order that has long been dominated by a powerful liberalism? And what will be the role of traditional Confucian values in the evolution of a new cultural order?

We know that Confucianism celebrates the relational values of deference and interdependence. That is, relationally constituted persons are to be understood as embedded in and nurtured by unique, transactional patterns of relations, a conception of person that contrasts rather starkly with the more familiar model of discrete, self-determining, and autonomous individuals that we have come to associate with liberal democracy. Will a Confucian ethic that locates moral conduct within a thick and richly textured pattern of family, community, and

natural relations challenge and change the international culture? Will these family-centered Confucian values under the rapidly evolving conditions in evidence today precipitate a new cultural world order?

James P. Carse provides us with a distinction between finite and infinite games that might be useful in beginning to think through how these Confucian values could make a difference in a newly emerging cultural order.¹ For Carse in formulating this distinction, “games” is really an analogy for the human experience broadly. The focus of finite games is on the agency of single actors who engage in a game played according to a finite set of rules that within a finite time guarantees a resolution—that is, a winner and a loser. Finite games thus have a finite beginning and end, and are played to win. The pervasiveness of individualism and the liberal values that attend it makes finite games a familiar model of the way in which we are inclined to think about our transactions as particular persons, as corporations, and as sovereign states, where such finite games seem relevant to most human activities that entail competition such as trade, business, education, foreign affairs, sports, and so on.

Infinite games have a different structure and desired outcome. There are no discernible beginnings or endings in infinite games. The focus is on strengthening relationships between entities rather than competition among single actors, and the ultimate goal is a shared flourishing as we continue to play the game. Further, infinite games are played according to rules that can be altered to serve the purpose of continuing the game when it appears that resolution is a possibility. The relationship among family members might be a good example of the infinite games we play, where a mother is committed to continuing to strengthen the relationship she has with her son so that together they can manage whatever increasingly complex problems their lives lived together might present. In the case of infinite games, the interdependence of relationships means that mother and son either collaborate and continue to succeed together, or fail together. Infinite games are always win-win or lose-lose.

When we look for the cultural resources necessary to respond to the global and national predicament described above as a perfect storm, we might anticipate the need for a shift in values, intentions, and practices that takes us from the preponderance of finite games played among self-interested, single actors to a pattern of infinite games played through the strengthening of those relationships at every level of scale—personal, communal, corporate, and those among sovereign states—that is necessary to overcome what are the shared problems of our day. And it is a common place that Confucianism and East Asian philosophies

¹ James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*. New York: Ballantine, 1987.

broadly—Buddhism and Daoism as well—begin from the primacy of vital relationships where such primacy is indeed the hallmark of infinite games.

SANDEL'S CHALLENGE: THEORIZING THE INTRASUBJECTIVE PERSON

G. W. F. Hegel in the introduction to his *Encyclopaedia Logic* famously observes that one of the most difficult problems in any philosophical investigation is the question of where to begin. This concern is not lost on Michael Sandel. As early as *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel has been strongly critical of the deracinated self that serves as starting point for the Kantian-cum-Rawlsian deontological conception of the individual. Allowing Sandel to speak for himself, he describes the Rawlsian deontological self in the following terms:

We can locate this individualism and identify the conceptions of the goods it excludes by recalling that the Rawlsian self is not only a subject of possession, but an antecedently individuated subject, standing always at a certain distance from the interests it has. One consequence of this distance is to put the self beyond the reach of experience, to make it invulnerable, to fix its identity once and for all.²

And Sandel is clear about the perceived limitations and the consequences of beginning from and embracing such an anemic conception of individual identity:

But a self so thoroughly independent as this rules out any conception of the good (or the bad) bound up with possession in the constitutive sense. It rules out the possibility of any attachment (or obsession) able to reach beyond our values and sentiments to engage our identity itself. It rules out the possibility of a public life in which for good or ill, the identity as well as the interests of the participants could be at stake. And it rules out the possibility that common purposes and ends could inspire more or less expansive self-understandings and so define a community in the constitutive sense, a community describing the subject and not just the objects of shared aspirations.³

² Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 62.

³ Ibid.

Sandel characterizes an alternative “intersubjective” if not “intrasubjective” conception of self that the Rawlsian position by implication clearly rules out, in the following terms:

Intrasubjective conceptions, on the other hand, allow that for certain purposes, the appropriate description of the moral subject may refer to a plurality of selves within a single individual human being, as when we account for inner deliberation in terms of the pull of competing identities, or moments of introspection in terms of occluded self-knowledge, or when we absolve someone from responsibility for the heretical beliefs ‘he’ held before his religious conversion.⁴

While Sandel certainly sees this intrasubjective conception of person as potentially more productive than the deontological self, he still has a sustained worry that there is the danger of it becoming so defused as to lose a sufficiently robust sense of choice, unity, and identity. Over the years, Sandel has appealed to a range of philosophers such as Aristotle and Hegel, and more recently, to the Jewish tradition, in his attempt to formulate an adequately intrasubjective conception of person that allows for a communally constitutive identity while at the same time retaining a sufficiently strong sense of personal unity and autonomy.

In many ways, in this project, Sandel has embraced the philosophical problem of our time. Almost a century ago, John Dewey in his *Individualism Old and New* rues the degeneration of unique individuality—the real possibilities and promise of realizing an American Emersonian soul—into a self-interested and contentious ideology of individualism that produces a zero-sum culture of winners and losers:

The spiritual factor of our tradition, equal opportunity and free association and intercommunication, is obscured and crowded out. Instead of the development of individualities which it prophetically set forth, there is a perversion of the whole ideal of individualism to conform to the practices of a pecuniary culture. It has become the source and justification of inequalities and oppressions.⁵

Dewey goes on to encourage if not to exhort philosophers to step up to the challenge of formulating a new “individuality” that would be consistent with his “idea” of democracy in which personal realization and communal realization are coterminous and mutually entailing:

⁴ Sandel, *Liberalism*, p. 63.

⁵ John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1962, p. 18.

The problem of constructing a new individuality consonant with the objective conditions under which we live is the deepest problem of our time.⁶

In this essay I want to join John Dewey and Michael Sandel in common cause in recommending that we take full advantage of all of our cultural resources, Asian as well as European, in formulating an adequate conception of the intrasubjective person. We might want to give Confucius and his relationally constituted conception of person a seat at the table in this continuing quest for an adequate alternative to the discrete, exclusive, and foundational individualism that has become default in most liberal conceptions of person.

A PRELUDE: A CONFUCIAN CONCEPTION OF HUMAN CULTURE

As a prelude to addressing the question of what are the dominant Confucian conceptions of human nature, I want to use the relatively recent phenomenon of how we have come to use the term “culture” broadly to anticipate the difference that cultural metaphors might make in our understanding of a term such as human nature. That is, we might look to the term “culture” within our own narrative to register the assumptions we bring with us in making horticulture and husbanding an apposite metaphor for culture as the nurturing and actualization of a given nature. More specifically, I want to suggest that it is because we default to these same teleological assumptions in how we think about the actualization of human nature that we stand in real danger of uncritically projecting just such an understanding onto the Confucian tradition.

In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) Raymond Williams famously describes “culture” as one of the two or three most complicated terms in the English language.⁷ He attributes this in part to the relative recency with which the meaning of “culture” has been metaphorically extended from its original sense of the physical processes of nurturing and cultivation—that is, the practices of horticulture and husbandry—to point toward characteristic modes of material, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic expression. Just as our commonsense dictates, we have tended to see these agrarian practices as being teleologically driven in bringing to fruition characteristic forms inherent in the objects of cultivation where human intervention serves as an external facilitation providing

⁶ Dewey, *Individualism*, p. 32.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

such objects with an instrumental source of discipline and control. The assumption is that the plant or animal flourishes when its growth is unimpeded and we provide it with the nourishment appropriate to its species.

It was only in the eighteenth century that “culture” was first used consistently to denote the entire “way of life” of a people, and only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was identified with specific civilization-distinguishing patterns of practices and values that are often moral and aesthetic in nature. In this latter case, it was used in the context of theories of progressive “social evolution” as something that divides and sets apart human societies, making one population and its “culture” more highly advanced than another. One contemporary legacy of this sense of contested worth among societies is the media’s frequent characterization of the multicultural tensions that emerge in setting the curriculum in higher education, as “culture wars.”

Just as in premodern Europe, in East Asia there was no single term that had a conceptual reach comparable to that of contemporary uses of the English word “culture.” But interestingly, we find that the term that was constructed and used throughout this geographical region to appropriate and translate this modern concept differs markedly in its metaphorical implications from those assumed with the word “culture.” As we might well expect, the traditionally agrarian East Asian civilizations abound with terms that, like the English word “culture,” are expressive of the instrumental physical processes of cultivation and nourishing plants and animals (for example, *xiu* 修, *yang* 養, *xu* 畜, *pei* 培, *zai* 栽, and so on), but such terms are altogether bypassed as points of metaphorical departure in constructing the binomial 文化 (*wenhua*) to denote “culture”—a compound word that combines the characters for “transforming” (*hua*) and “the inscribing and embellishing of the human experience through literary, civil, and artistic pursuits” (*wen*). Whereas metaphorically rooting “culture” in practices of plant and animal domestication invites seeing cultural norms as having a transcendent disciplinary force with respect to the inherent potential in the spontaneous growth of that which is being “cultured,” *wen* has traditionally been understood (with significant moral, social, and political as well as aesthetic implications) as an inspired collaboration with nature, elaborating upon it, refining it, and transforming it with significant moral and aesthetic effect. *Wen* is the difference between a naturally occurring deposit of ore and the power and elegance of a Shang dynasty bronze.

As is demonstrated by its occurrence in the early classics, the topic of *wenhua* is an ancient one. *Wenhua* is a modern Japanese *kanji* term drawn from an idea pervasive in classical Chinese sources such as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) that first appears as a specific binomial in the court bibliographer Liu Xiang’s 劉向 (77–6 BCE) *Garden of Stories* (*Shuoyuan* 說苑):

The sages in governing the world properly gave priority to cultural virtuosity over martial force. Indeed, the martial only arose in response to intransigence. It was only when civilizing efforts were ineffective in improving upon the people that punishments were administered.⁸

And, by at least the late fifth century, Chinese literary theorists such as Liu Xie 劉勰 (465?–522?) were identifying *wen* and artistic inspiration explicitly with the self-so-ing (*ziran* 自然) and ceaselessly procreative dynamics (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息) within the coextensive natural and cultural worlds (*dao* 道), affirming that nature and nurture far from being in opposition, are rather a coevolving, contrapuntal process understood to be at the heart of realizing a profoundly symbiotic moral and aesthetic harmony in the world. This disparity between European and Asian languages in the cultural metaphors in which “culture” and “human nature” are embedded is certainly related to the stark contrast between the persistent understanding and use of “creativity” in the Abrahamic traditions in which an *ex nihilo* creativity properly belongs to a self-sufficient Creator God, as opposed to the classical Confucian tradition in which the Confucian project as it is defined in the cosmology of the *Yijing* or *Zhongyong* as examples requires of the human being nothing less than the responsibility and the imagination of being a co-creator with the cosmos.⁹

Reflecting further on *wen*, in a sharp departure from the contemporary use of “wars” as a metaphor for cultural tensions, as we have seen in the passage cited above from the *Garden of Stories*, from ancient times *wen* has been contrasted explicitly with the coercive, destructive, and dehumanizing use of martial force (*wu* 武). *Wen* instead denotes the expansively civil dimension of the human experience that emerges when the values and moral life of a community are guided by an aesthetically—and critically—enriching counterpoint between persistent canonical texts and those continuing commentaries that have been crafted in each generation as a response to the prevailing conditions. In sum, the conceptual genealogy of *wenhua* implies that culture emerges through an intrinsic and dynamic relationship between persistence and change—between a persistent moral and aesthetic tradition and its internal, vital impulse for transformation (*biantong* 變通). Retrospective cultural conservation and the prospective penchant for productive change far from being opposed to each other, are complementary and mutually enhancing. Indeed, I would further argue that it is this complementary, contrapuntal moral and aesthetic dynamic between person and world

⁸ 《說苑·指武》：『聖人之治天下也，先文德而後武力。凡武之興，為不服也，文化不改，然後加誅。』

⁹ As *Psalms* 24 insists: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, It is He that has made us and not we ourselves.”

that has immediate relevance for how human nature is to be understood in the Confucian tradition.

A CONFUCIAN CONCEPTION OF HUMAN NATURE

Michael Sandel, in his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, pointedly observes that in our philosophical narrative:

To speak of human nature is often to suggest a classical teleological conception, associated with the notion of a universal human essence, invariant in all times and places.¹⁰

Lee Yearley in his study of Mencius and Aquinas offers a refinement of this notion of a given human nature by making a helpful distinction between an ontological or discovery model that he would reject as a familiar yet mistaken interpretation of these same two philosophers, and a developmental or biological model of human nature that he would fairly ascribe to both of them. Of the former, Yearley says:

In a discovery model . . . human nature exists as a permanent set of dispositions that are obscured but that can be contacted or discovered. People do not cultivate inchoate capacities. Rather they discover a hidden ontological reality that defines them. The discovery model reflects, then, ontological rather than biological notions. An ontological reality, the true self, always is present no matter what specific humans, particular instances of it, are or do.¹¹

In our understanding of the Mencian conception of human nature, Yearley advocates for the latter developmental or biological model that he describes as follows:

What can be called a biological framework informs Mencius's ideas on human nature and its characteristic successes and failures. . . . To speak of the nature of something within such a framework is to refer to some innate constitution that manifests itself in patterns of growth and culminates in specifiable forms.¹²

¹⁰ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism*, p. 50.

¹¹ Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 60.

¹² *Liberalism*, pp. 58–59.

While the developmental model of human nature might be more compelling than the discovery model, it is still strongly Aristotelian in its understanding of human potential as the innate defining “capacities humans possess”¹³ that are then manifested and actualized in the specifiable forms that determine who and what we are to become. Perhaps what recommends this developmental model to Yearley and to others is Mencius’s own frequent appeal to a horticultural and husbanding analogy in which, for example, seeds of barley if uninjured and nurtured will achieve the characteristic form of barley.¹⁴

Indeed, in the *Mencius* and other canonical Confucian texts, the familiar reference to horticultural and husbanding metaphors has often been construed as reinforcing the Aristotelian idea that plants and animals in growing to become what they essentially are, are simply actualizing the potential that is inherent embryonically in their “root” or “seed.” But what in fact makes these horticulture and husbanding analogies appropriate for capturing the growth of relationally constituted “human becomings” is that even within the pedestrian activities of farming and the raising of animals there is an acute dependence upon a contrived environment and upon concentrated human effort. Without sustained, radical human intervention, most “seeds” far from becoming what they “are,” become anything and everything else. Without the benefit of intensive intervention and cultivation on behalf of what we think they will “naturally” become, most acorns become squirrels, most corn becomes cows, most eggs become omelets, and most apples become compost. Indeed, it is only one in a million acorns that becomes an oak tree. The “root” or “seed” of anything and what it will become is as much a function of intense cultivation and the contingencies of circumstances as it is of the native conditions from which it putatively “begins.”

When we turn to the more complex human experience, we can go beyond Yearley’s culturally-bound ontological and developmental models, and identify a third, perhaps more interesting holistic and aesthetic “narrative” understanding of human nature wherein, as with *wenbua*, person and world grow and evolve together in a dynamic, contrapuntal relationship. The identities of persons are certainly grounded in the thick native “beginnings” of family, community, and environing inchoate relationships that need to be both nurtured and protected from loss or injury, but such identities only emerge *in media res* in the complex and radically situated process of these relationships achieving full resolution and meaning as they are cultivated, grown, and consummated over their lifetimes. Their potential far from being a given, in fact emerges in the always transactional events that in sum constitute lives lived in the world.

¹³ *Liberalism*, p. 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

That is, the “potential” for becoming human is not simply these “beginnings”—something inborn “within” persons exclusive of dynamic context and family relations. In the first place, in this natural cosmology, there are neither deracinated persons nor isolated beginnings. Persons do not exist inside their skins; they exist only in their associations. There is a primacy of the vital roles and relations that constitute a person in the different phases of a human career, and persons as individuals at any time are only second-order abstractions from these vital relations. And since persons as nested, narratives-within-narratives are constituted by these evolving, eventful relations, the “potential” of persons and their achieved identities in fact emerge *pari passu* from out of the specific, contingent transactions that constitute their shared lives. Thus, the best sense we can make of “potential” here is that potential, while certainly being in degree antecedent as a set of historically given relational conditions, is also prospective and evolves within the ever changing circumstances. This means that rather than being generic or universal, such potential is always unique to the career of this specific relational person, and rather than existing simply as an inherent and defining endowment, can only be known post hoc after the unfolding of the particular narrative.

Recently, and specifically in reference to the classical Chinese language, the distinguished British sinologist Angus Graham concludes that in reporting on the eventful flow of Chinese *qi* cosmology, “the sentence structure of Classical Chinese places us in a world of process about which we ask . . . “Whence?” and also, since it is moving, “At what time?”¹⁵ What Graham is saying here is that any perceived coherence in the emergent order of things that is assumed in Chinese cosmology tends to be historicist as well as being abstract and theoretical, and hence has to be qualified by both a location and by a particular time in its evolution. When Graham asks after human nature within the context of Chinese cosmology, for example, beyond the question of “*what* is it?” he must also ask “*where* was it thought of in this way?” and “*when* did it mean this?” because human nature is conceived of as an ongoing and evolving process rather than as some essential “timeless” property or endowment. Indeed, a cosmic order that includes human nature while being understood in general and persistent terms, must also be qualified by the local and the specific. For Chinese cosmology, in the ongoing process of the transformation of the world around us, neither time nor place will be denied. The implication of Graham’s insight into Chinese cosmology is that all of the rational structures that might be appealed to in expressing an understanding of the human experience—that is, the theories, concepts,

¹⁵ A. C. Graham. *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, pp. 360–411.

categories, and definitions that we might reference— are themselves made vulnerable in degree by the always shifting organs and objects of their application. What is at stake here is Mencius's answer to perhaps our most basic and important philosophical question: How should we understand what it means to become fully human? How do we define what it means to be a human "being"?— by speculative assumptions about innate, isolatable causes that locate persons outside of the roles and relations in which they live their lives, or alternatively, as having "become" human by taking account of the initial, native conditions and context within which persons are inextricably embedded, and then by assaying the full aggregation of consequent action as their life stories unfold? How do we explain birth, life, and growth of the human "being"?—by reduplicative causal accounts (the infant is a ready-made adult), by teleological accounts (the infant is simply preliminary to the existing ideal), or as a human "becoming" that appeals to a contextual, narrative account available to us through a phenomenology of deliberate personal action? Given our own world in which linear causality and a strong commitment to teleology are so entrenched in our cultural metaphors, and in which a foundational individualism has become an ideology that has a monopoly on our intellectual conscious, we must ask whether such seemingly default commonsense assumptions about *individual* human "beings" are consistent historically with the Confucian project as it was situated and has developed within the natural *qi* cosmology that serves this tradition as its interpretive context.

Turning to the texts themselves, and reflecting on the question of the Confucian conception of human nature, we might worry about a possible equivocation that emerges in the interpretation of a frequently cited passage from the *Analects*:

The Master said, "We humans are similar by nature, but we vary greatly by virtue of our habits."¹⁶

The influence of our governing agrarian metaphor inclines us to the uncritical assumption that for Confucius, human nature here references some variant of a universal, inborn, fixed, and self-sufficient endowment that is defining of all human "beings" and that programs us naturally as human beings to become human. But returning to the Confucian conception of "culture" and "cultivation" above and its reference to the alternative metaphor of *wenbua*, when Confucius observes that humans are "similar by nature" he might mean that human beings are alike *not* in having some fixed, essential nature, but in having a range of

¹⁶ *Analects* 17.2: 子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」 The Dingzhou text has *sheng* 生 for *xing* 性, but this is a common variant in editions of the classical texts.

unlimited moral and aesthetic possibilities available to them in applying themselves to the project of personal growth. Our “nature” or perhaps better, our “natural propensities” as humans do not reference a given source or design, but rather point to a shared, as yet undefined capacity to grow and to “design” ourselves in unique and distinctive ways. And “to vary greatly by virtue of our habits” references the wide ranging variance that is made possible as a function of the complexity of these similar, unbounded, aesthetically and morally-charged natural propensities. As Tang Junyi observes explicitly in his own reading of this *Analects* passage:

That is to say, Confucius is not here imputing a fixed human nature to human beings, but rather implies that ‘similar by nature’ means the capacity of humans in growing themselves to transform their persons, and references the unlimited possibilities they have available to them in doing so.¹⁷

In this sense, the generative habits we are able to achieve and the culture we are able to produce are an expression of our creative natural propensities, and are not simply the reduplicative actualization of some antecedent and limiting template that would stand in stark contrast to and indeed vitiate such an aesthetic achievement.

Tang Junyi himself underscores the vital, collaborative, creative, and emergent nature of this process:

Within Chinese natural cosmology what is held in general is not some first principle. The root pattern or coherence (*genben zhi li* 根本之理) of anything is its “life force” (*shengli* 生理), and this life force is its natural propensities for growth (*xing* 性). The *xing* is expressed in the quality of its interactions with other things and events. The *xing* or “life force” then entailing spontaneity and transformation has nothing to do with necessity. . . The emergence of any particular phenomenon is a function of the interaction between its prior conditions and other things and events as external influences. So how something interacts with other things and events and the form of this interaction is not determined by the thing in itself. . . Thus the *xing* of anything in itself is inclusive of this process of transformability in response to whatever it encounters.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tang Junyi, *Complete Works of Tang Junyi* 唐君毅全集. Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1991, Vol 13:32, 此即孔子不重人性之為固定之性之旨，而隱含一相近之人性，為能自生長而變化，而具無定限之可能之旨者也。

¹⁸ Tang Junyi, *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 98–100: 中國自然宇宙論中，共相非第一義之理。物之存在的根本之理為生理，此生理即物之性。物之性表現於與他物感通之德量。性或生理，乃自由原則，生化原則，

Tang Junyi is arguing that in our understanding of the Confucian human nature (*xing* 性) we must give appropriate value to the fact that this graph is quite literally a combination of “heartmind” (*xin* 心) initially referencing those native, inchoate, relational conditions that provide the context and locus for growth, and “birth, life, and growth” (*sheng* 生) as the spontaneous and vital process of birth, growth, and life of these native conditions as they emerge and are transformed within always overlapping narratives. Tang Junyi emphasizes the creativity that attends the situated, transactional, and emergent nature of the human narrative:

The more transactions something has with other things, the greater its creative impulse . . . The virtuosity of any particular thing is a function of what novelty and creativity emerges and is manifested in its transactions with other things. It is also a function of the ongoing tendency to expansiveness that comes with being self-consciously able to constantly seek out more and better interactions, and being able to abandon the mechanical control of one’s own past habits and those mechanical habits from external intervening forces. But this is not something that the ordinary run of things can do—it is only we humans that can do it.¹⁹

Importantly, to appreciate Tang Junyi’s position as it is expressed here, we need three clarifications. First, if we register fully the “birth, life, and growth” that comes with *sheng* instead of just “birth,” the possibilities entailed by human nature do not lie solely within things themselves; rather the putative “nature” of human beings in particular, while certainly deliberate and resolute when properly directed by the heartmind, is a defused and creative collaboration with their various environments, human and otherwise, as it is expressed in their actions. And secondly, while heartmind certainly references the native human conditions at the beginning of a person’s narrative, following from its “life and growth” it is also a metonymic locus for the dynamic, complex process of the creative articulation and expression of the habitudes of persons that enable them to act deliberately over the course of this narrative, and to enchant the human experience through the aesthetics of culture: that is, the “inscribing and embellishing of the human experience through literary, civil, and artistic pursuits.” And third, it is the complex and vital capacity we have to produce culture and transform the cosmos

而非必然原則。 . . . 蓋任一事象之生起，必由以前之物與其他之交感，以為其外緣。而一物與他物之如何交感或交感之形式，則非由任一物之本身所決定。 . . . 因而一物之性之本身，即包含一隨所感而變化之性。

¹⁹ Tang Junyi, *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, p. 100: 且物必愈與他物感通，而後愈有更大之創造的生起。 . . . 個體的德量，由其與他物感通，新有所創造的生起而顯；亦由時時能自覺的求多所感通，求善於感通，並脫離其過去之習慣之機械支配，及外界之物之力之機械支配，而日趨宏大。但此非一般物之所能，唯人乃能之耳。

that gives the human special status as the counterpart of the heavens and the earth.

Given Confucius's preference for underscoring the concrete, existential product of our refined habits that pervades his discourse—that is, his repeated references to *ren* 仁 as a human virtuosity achieved in our roles and relations through the emulation of moral exemplars—and given his characteristic aversion to the idealities of abstract speculation and “conjecture” (*yi* 意),²⁰ it is perhaps not surprising that his protégé Zigong remarks: “We can learn from the Master's cultural refinements, but will not hear him discourse on subjects such as ‘natural propensities’ and ‘the way of *tian*.’”²¹ The cultural achievements of Confucius are there for all to see; the possible worlds that our creative human capacities can produce are open-ended and as yet conceptually indeterminate. For Confucius, consummatory virtuosity must come first. It is only through realizing the cultural refinements in our own lives that we can come to have insight into the possibilities of the world around us. As the *Mencius* observes:

Only those who get the most from their heartminds (*xin*) understand their natural propensities (*xing*), and to understand these natural propensities is to understand the ways of the world (*tian*). Maintaining their heartminds and nurturing their natural propensities is the way to do service in this world (*tian*). It matters not whether one dies young or achieves longevity, cultivating one's person and seeing what happens is how one lives a life.²²

In reflecting on this same relationship between experience and its conceptualization, Tang Junyi also emphasizes the primacy of the realization of human aspirations over the subsequent conceptualization and articulation of them; the only way to really understand and give voice to our human possibilities is to realize them personally:

Human realization is not really able to do justice to the human possibilities. And in seeking to understand the human possibilities it is not the same as persons who, in wanting to know the possibilities of other things, come to know them objectively through hypothesis and inference. Rather such an understanding comes from how we put into practice our inner aspirations and how we go about realizing them. That is to say, when we have some

²⁰ *Analects* 9.4: 子絕四：毋意，毋必，毋固，毋我。There were four things the Master abstained from entirely: He would not conjecture, he did not claim or demand certainty, he was not inflexible, and he was not self-absorbed.

²¹ *Analects* 5.13: 子貢曰：「夫子之文章，可得而聞也；夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也。」

²² *Mencius* 7A1: 孟子曰：「盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。殀壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也。」

understanding of the human propensities for growth we will surely have the language and concepts to give such knowledge expression. Such linguistic conceptualization follows upon what is known of it, and is formed continuously as the opportunity presents itself.²³

THE CONFUCIAN “INTRASUBJECTIVE” PERSON

A doctrine of internal relations begins from the primacy of the organic continuity that is constitutive of putative “things.” Given the primacy of this vital relationality in the cosmology that gives context to Confucian role ethics, both embodied biological relations and social relations as they are captured in the cognate, aspectual terms *ti* 體 and *li* 禮—“lived body” and “embodied living”—are organically diffused as those dynamic, interactive, and interpenetrating patterns that make up the narratives of lives being lived.²⁴ Such patterns are initially so weak and tentative that we might be inclined to describe infants as “biological organisms,” but this is to abstract them from their contexts. They are from the outset intrasubjective, nested in and informed by the field of familial and communal relations within which evolve, and as these patterns are marked by continuing growth and depth in meaning, they enable infants to become increasingly distinctive as they learn to live well.

But let us be clear. There are no infants as “biological organisms” independent of the web of relationships that constitute them. Our claim is that an infant born into the world is not a discrete or ready-made entity either biologically or socially that, as an exclusive life form, has its own putative initial beginning. Rather, drawing nourishment from its physical, social, and cultural umbilical cords, the infant is born *in media res* as an intrasubjective narrative nested within narratives. Indeed, the infant far from being discrete or isolated, is the diffused yet focused presencing of a physical, social, and cultural matrix or field of radial relationships that extend to the furthest reaches of the cosmos.

Of course just as we have to be careful to distinguish walking as an activity in the world from a leg, we must not elide the activity of mind and the brain. The

²³ Tang Junyi *Complete Works* Vol. 13, p. 22: 人之現實性不必能窮盡人之可能性，而欲知人之可能性，亦不能如人之求知其他事物之可能性，而本推論與假設以客觀知之；而當由人之內在的理想之如何實踐，與如何實現以知之。即對人性有知，自亦必有名言概念，加以表達。然此名言概念，乃順此所知，而隨機以相繼的形成。

²⁴ See Roger T. Ames. *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Chinese University Press and University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. In chapter 3 I use these two terms *ti* 體 and *li* 禮 as a heuristic for explaining the process of achieving personal identity in the early Confucian tradition.

immediate family members who quite literally “mind” the infant communicate and impart their mature culture to this organism, and initially serve as the primary resource that an emerging “mindful” and “whole-hearted” child can draw upon in shaping a personal identity. If the phenomenon of infancy teaches us anything, it is certainly not the independence of one’s agency; on the contrary, by reflecting on our early years we come to understand that “mind” is a social phenomenon shared among us that emerges as embodied organisms communicate with each other to transform mere association into thriving families and communities. Infancy should teach us to appreciate the dependence we have on our relationships for our very survival, and ultimately for the evolving compositing of our identities.

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