

# Achieving Personal Identity in Confucian Role Ethics: Tang Junyi on Human Nature *as* Conduct<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: “Human *Beings* or “Human *Becomings*?”

What is a human “being”? This was a perennial Greek question asked in Plato’s *Phaedo* and Aristotle’s *De Anima*. And perhaps the most persistent answer from the time of Pythagoras was an ontological one: The “being” of a human being is a permanent, ready-made, and self-sufficient soul. And “know thyself” – the signature exhortation of Socrates – is to know this soul. Each of us *is* a person, and from conception, has the integrity of *being* a person.

*In what way* does a person *become* consummately human? This then was the perennial Confucian question asked explicitly in all of the *Four Books*: in the *Great Learning*, in the *Analects of Confucius*, in the *Mencius*, and again in the *Zhongyong*. And the answer from the time of Confucius was a moral, aesthetic, and ultimately religious one. One *becomes* human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one’s initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one’s life force within family, community, and cosmos.<sup>2</sup> “Cultivate your person” – *xiushen* 修身 – the signature exhortation of the Confucian canons – is the ground of the Confucian project of becoming consummate as a person (*ren* 仁): it is to cultivate one’s conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that one lives. In this Confucian tradition, we need each other. If there is only one person, there are no persons.<sup>3</sup> Becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all.

In appealing to an understanding of Chinese natural cosmology as the relevant interpretive context for this Confucian project, I want to provide a language that will distinguish this worldview from the reductive, single-ordered, “One-behind-the-many” ontological model that grounds classical Greek metaphysical thinking wherein one comes to “understand” the many by knowing retrospectively the four-

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1 An expanded version of this essay has appeared as integral to a chapter of Ames 2011.

2 See *Analects* 12.1: “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes consummate in one’s conduct.” 克己復禮為仁. All translations are from Ames and Rosemont 1998.

3 “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings.” Fingarette 1983, 217.

dational and causal ideal that lies behind them. Instead, we find that in Chinese cosmology there is a symbiotic and holistic focus-field model of order that is illustrated rather concisely in the organic, ecological sensibilities of the *Great Learning* 大學. The meaning of the family is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each of its members, and by extension, the meaning of the entire cosmos is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each person within family and community. Personal worth is the source of human culture, and human culture in turn is the aggregating resource that provides a context for each person's cultivation.

While certainly having important theoretical implications, the enduring power of this Confucian project is that it proceeds from a relatively straightforward account of the actual human experience. It is a pragmatic naturalism in the sense that, rather than relying upon metaphysical presuppositions or supernatural speculations, it focuses instead on the possibilities for enhancing personal worth available to us here and now through enchanting the ordinary affairs of the day. A grandmother's love for her grandchild is at once the most ordinary of things, and the most extraordinary of things.

Confucius by developing his insights around the most basic and enduring aspects of the ordinary human experience – family reverence, deference to others, friendship, a cultivated sense of shame, education, community, and so on – has guaranteed their continuing relevance. One characteristic of Confucianism that is certainly there in the words of Confucius himself and that has made his teachings so resilient in the Chinese tradition, is its porousness and adaptability. His contribution was simply to take ownership of the cultural legacy of his time, to adapt the wisdom of the past to his own present historical moment, and then to recommend to future generations that they do the same.<sup>4</sup>

The personal model of Confucius that is remembered in the *Analects* does not purport to lay out some generic formula by which everyone should live their lives. Rather, the text recalls the narrative of one special person: How he in his relations with others cultivated his humanity, and how he lived a fulfilling life, much to the admiration of those around him. We might take liberties and play with the title of the *Analects*, reading “discoursing” (*lunyu* 論語) more specifically as “role-based discoursing” (*lunyu* 倫語). Indeed, in reading the *Analects*, we encounter the relationally constituted Confucius making his way through life by living his many roles as best he can: as a caring family member, as a strict teacher and mentor, as a scrupulous and incorruptible scholar-official, as a concerned neighbor and member of the community, as an always critical political consultant, as the grateful progeny of his progenitors, as an enthusiastic heir to a specific cultural legacy,

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4 *Analects* 7.1.

indeed, as a member of a chorus of joyful boys and men singing their way home after a happy day on the river Yi. He offers us historical models rather than principles, and exhortations rather than imperatives. The power and lasting value of his insights lie in the fact that, as I will endeavor to show, these ideas are intuitively persuasive, and readily adaptable to the conditions of ensuing generations, including our own.

Indeed, invoking the Chinese natural cosmology as context, what makes Confucianism more empirical than empiricism – that is, what makes Confucianism a *radical* empiricism – is the fact that it respects the uniqueness of the particular, and the need for a generative wisdom that takes this uniqueness into account in anticipating a productive future. Rather than advancing universal principles and assuming a taxonomy of natural kinds grounded in some notion of strict identity, Confucianism proceeds from always provisional generalizations made from those *particular* historical instances of successful living, the specific events recounted in the narrative of Confucius himself being a case in point.

### Tang Junyi 唐君毅 on “Human Nature” (*renxing* 人性) as Conduct

Tang Junyi grounds his work in his understanding of Chinese natural cosmology, and has offered a series of generalizations that he takes as defining of a persistent yet always changing Chinese cosmology. These propositions proffered by Tang Junyi provide yet another vocabulary for reiterating and reinforcing the characterization of Chinese cosmology we might abstract from the “Great Tradition” 大傳 commentary on the *Book of Changes* 易經. Tang in his final proposition invokes a feature of Chinese cosmology that provides insight into the vectoral yet always contingent nature of the human experience. For Tang Junyi as a Confucian, “human nature” (*xing* 性) is a provisional, generalized disposition that is at once persistent and yet always under revision in its interactions with other things. In Tang’s own words, Chinese cosmology entails the notion that “‘human nature’ is nothing but the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves” (*xing ji tiandao guan* 性即天道觀).<sup>5</sup>

For Tang Junyi, any teleological or genetic assumptions we might have about being human have to be qualified by the spontaneous emergence of novelty within any specific context, and by the creative advance in the continuing present of any situation. “Human nature,” then, is a generalization regarding the aggregating yet open-ended disposition of human beings over time, and is nothing more or less than an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuosity (*ren* 仁) within our inherited natural and cultural legacy (*tiandao* 天道). That is, the nature of each person must be recovered from and understood in terms of the continuous unfolding of the entire cosmos.

5 Or, more literally, “human nature is the way of nature.” Tang 1991, vol. 11, 22–24.

In fact, rather than referencing some fixed endowment, it is for Tang precisely the indeterminate possibility for creative change that is the most salient feature of the human *xing*. What is given in the *xing* of persons – that is, in their initial conditions – is most importantly the propensity for growth, cultivation, and refinement.

In Tang Junyi's general discussion of the Confucian understanding of the "nature" (*xing* 性) of things, he quite appropriately begins from the etymology of the term by allowing for its immediate association with "life" (*sheng* 生) itself. Expanding upon this connection, he acknowledges the irreducibly relational and contextual character of the content of the human experience, and notes that for this reason, the *xing* of anything including human beings necessarily has two referents: it denotes the continuing life and function of a particular thing itself, and also refers to that which in a thing continues the life of other things.<sup>6</sup> The nature of the earth, for example, lies not only in its own conditions – something porous in which different kinds of plants can be productively grown or something solid on which suitable human habitation can be built. The nature of earth also lies in its propensity to grow and give life to other things – the way in which it is life-giving for other plants and animals.<sup>7</sup> Analogously, Confucian persons are defined relationally and collaterally – not only what they "are," but more importantly, what they "do" with and for other persons and things in the world.

Tang Junyi further clarifies what he means by the cosmological proposition that "human nature is nothing but the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves":

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 tendencies" (*xing* 性). Anything's natural tendencies are expressed in the quality of its interactions with other things and events. "Natural tendencies" or "life force" then entailing spontaneity and transformation have 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 basic "nature" of anything includes this transformability in response to whatever it encounters.<sup>8</sup>

6 Tang 1991, vol. 13, 28–29.

7 *Zuozhuan*, Duke Zhao 25. He also cites the example of medicine that is most often defined in terms of its effects on the human subject.

8 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 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，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

To illustrate this notion of contingent emergence, Tang provides a gloss on the opening passage of the *Zhongyong* 中庸. In his commentary on this text, Tang seeks to preclude any essentialistic interpretation of human nature. In explanation of “what *tian* (conventionally translated ‘Heaven’) commands is called natural tendencies” (*tianming zhi wei xing* 天命之謂性), he states explicitly:

What is meant by this claim is not that *tian* according to some fixed fate determines the conduct and progress of human beings. On the contrary, *tian* endows humans with a natural disposition that, being more or less free of the mechanical control of their established habits and of external intervening forces, undergoes a creative advance within their context that is expressive of this spontaneity.<sup>9</sup>

Tang then goes on to distinguish humans from other things by their degree of complexity and their self-conscious freedom and creativity:

It is only in having more interactions with other things that something increases its creative impulse. [...] The quality of something is a function of what novelty emerges and is manifested in its interactions with other things and events. 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.<sup>10</sup>

It is in this sense that the *Book of Rites* 禮記 can claim that “humans are the heart-and-mind of the world” (*renzhe tiandi zhi xin ye* 人者天地之心也).<sup>11</sup> It is through an irreducible intersubjectivity that persons become reflexive and self-conscious in their conduct, and thus have the freedom and creativity to strive after optimal relations. To speak of “human nature” for Tang, then, is to generalize the aggregating yet open-ended disposition of particular humans over time.

In Tang Junyi’s extensive work on “human nature”, he demonstrates a great sensitivity to the existential coloring of the classical Confucian conception of what it means to become human.

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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。

9 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 100: 所謂天命之為性，非天以一指定命運規定人物之行動運化，而正是賦人物以多多少少不受自己過去之習慣所機械支配，亦不受外界之來感之力之機械支配，而隨境有一創造的生起而表現自由之性。

10 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 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。

11 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 22.

For Tang,

Since any particular existent has life, in saying that it has a *xing*, what is important is not in saying what the nature and character of this entity is, but in saying what the direction of its life's existence is.<sup>12</sup>

It is only in that it has life and growth that it has *xing*. And among things, as we have seen, humans are a special case. The *xing* of humans cannot be approached in the same way as our understanding of the *xing* of other phenomena because humans have an internal perspective on their own evolving constitution that is not available to them in the investigation of other things. In reflecting on the relationships between experience and conceptualization, Tang asserts that:

It is not certain that human realization can exhaust human possibilities; if one wants to understand human possibilities it is not like seeking to know the possibilities of other things that can, on the basis of inference and hypothesis, be known objectively. Rather it comes from the way in which persons realize their internal aspirations and how they come to know them. Once we have an understanding of this human *xing*, we will of our own accord surely have the linguistic concepts through which to express it. Such linguistic conceptualization follows upon what is known, and is formed continuously as the opportunity presents itself.<sup>13</sup>

Tang thus emphasizes the primacy of the realization of the human aspirations over the conceptualization and articulation of them, giving full notice to the personal locus of that realization. He disassociates the conversation among classical Chinese philosophers over the meaning of *xing* from the contemporary science of psychology to the extent that in the latter case, there is a desire to treat the human "being" as an objective phenomenon. For Tang, it is the reflexive and self-conscious existential project that is the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of the classical Confucian conception of *xing*. In fact, it is precisely the indeterminate possibility for creative change that Tang identifies as the most salient feature of the human *xing*:

Usually what is meant by "nature" as quality or character, as when Westerners refer to it in the language of "property, characteristics, propensity, and essence" is a fixed quality, disposition, or directionality. But when we reflect upon what nature is from the perspective of the experience of the inner aspirations that we as humans have in relation to our world, there is a real question as to whether or not we can say that

12 Tang 1991, vol. 13, 28: 然就一具體存在之有生，而即言其有性，則重要者不在說此存在之性質性相之為何，而是其生命存在之所向之為何。

13 Tang 1991, vol. 13, 21–22: 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。



humans have any fixed nature. This is because the world that humans encounter and the aspirations they bring to it both entail limitless change [...]. For the most part, the discussion of human nature in Chinese thought has had as its one common feature a reference to this capacity for boundless change as wherein the special nature of the human lies. This then is the human's spiritual nature (*lingxing* 靈性) that differs from the fixity and lack of spirituality in the nature of other things.<sup>14</sup>

What is an initial condition in the nature of human beings is most importantly the propensity for growth, cultivation, and refinement – a human capacity for radical changeability. It is thus that throughout Tang's analysis, and especially in reference to the human phenomenon, he underscores the fundamental relationality and colaterality of *xing*:

It is my opinion that in looking at the beginnings of a theory of human nature in China's early philosophers, the basic idea was not to take humans or their *xing* as some objective thing that can be looked at and discussed in terms of its universal nature or its special nature or its possibilities. As humans encountered the myriad things and heaven and earth, and as they encountered their inner experience of their own aspirations, what was important for them was to reflect on what the *xing* of this human is, and what the *xing* of heaven and earth and the myriad things is. The way the human was perceived within the mainstream of Chinese thought was as a kind of thing amidst and among the myriad things, and not just as one kind of the myriad things.<sup>15</sup>

If we were to summarize the notion of person that follows from Tang Junyi's description of "human nature", taking the notion of "growing and living" (*sheng* 生) within its contextualizing relations as its defining feature, we would have to allow that such an irreducibly complex agency is vital and inherently active, and is not only responsive to its environments, but is further characterized by the freedom and creativity to be self-defining and self-aware. This reflexive "self" has to be understood as irreducibly transactional: shaping and being shaped in its contextualiz-

14 Tang 1991, vol. 13, 24: 如西方人之 Property, Characteristics, Propensity 及 Essence 諸名之所指，皆是一定之性相性質或性向。然吾人若由人之面對天地萬物與其所體驗之內在理想，而自反省其性之何所是時，是否可言人有定性，則大成問題。因人之所面對之天地萬物與理想，皆為變化無方者。[...] 中國思想之論人性，幾於大體上共許之一義，即為直就此人性之能變化無方處，而指為人之特性之所在，此即人之靈性，而異於萬物之為一定而不靈者。

15 Tang 1991, vol. 13, 21: 依吾人之意，以觀中國先哲之人性論之原始，其基本觀點，首非將人或人性，視為一所對之客觀事物，來論述其普遍性，特殊性，或可能性，而主要是就人之面對天地萬物，並面對其內部所體驗之人生理想，而自反省此人性之所是，以及天地萬物之性之何所是。緣是而依中國思想之諸大流，以觀人之性，則人雖為萬物中之一類，而不只為萬物之一類。

ing relations. This agency is first and foremost a striving and a “doing” that is an expression of life and growth, and that in the production of enhanced meaning, brings with it aspiration, frustration, and sometimes, even satisfaction. Such an understanding of agency is wholly naturalistic in that it makes no appeal to a metaphysics of self or to any unifying substratum such as soul or mind, and thus is more of a centered, concentrated vitality than a unity. This agency is hylozoistic – at once psychic and physical – that is always embodied and embodying as a porous membrane that strives to achieve meaning and coherence in the changing configuration of its relations. It offers a revisionist and emergent understanding of agency that is animated and projective, and that having developed its own inflected and reflexive sense of itself out of its intersubjective relations with others, becomes increasing enculturated through the semiotic processes and symbolic competencies that come to shape it in these associations. It is radically embedded, and can only be understood by moving from field to focus, from the totality to the particular, taking into account the full compass of its contextualizing relations. Indeed this agency is an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuosity (*ren*) within our inherited cultural legacy (*tiandao*), allowing Tang to insist that “human nature is nothing but the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves”. It is this sense of growth in its achieved personal uniqueness and its intimate continuity with the totality through family and community relations that provides a direct line from the self-conscious deference, veneration, and gratitude of the moral life to the spirituality we associate with an increasingly religious sensitivity. This notion of agency breathes life into the Confucian vocabulary, transforming terms such as “excellence” (*de* 德) into striving after and “getting” (*de* 得) and “appropriateness” (*yi* 義) into a self-conscious sense of responsibility and accountability for the quality of meaning in one’s relations with others.

I want to argue that, with respect to this notion of human nature, Tang Junyi’s “New Confucianism” is not so new. This collateral and multilateral understanding of person is in fact consistent with the Confucianism espoused in the *Great Learning* that sets the Confucian project. And this Confucian project can be described as a radical empiricism that is directed at achieving the highest integrated cultural, moral, and spiritual growth for the person-in-community. For Confucius, communal harmony begins here in indefatigable personal cultivation. And through growth in familial, communal, and natural relations, the aspirant seeks to ascend to cosmic consequence in spiraling radial circles. The Confucian sages are no more than ordinary persons who, through their resolute commitment and assiduous discipline in their family and communal relations, learn to do the most ordinary of things in extraordinary ways. Indeed, the familiar Confucian claim that “everyone can become a sage” is an assertion that the spontaneous emergence of real significance in



the ordinary business of the day is itself the meaning and content of sagely virtuosity. As we read in the *Zhongyong*:

The vision of the moral life (*dao*) is not at all remote from people. If someone were to take it as being remote, it would not be the true vision.<sup>16</sup>

This idea that the inspired life is nothing more than the transformation of immediate human relations is a familiar theme in the Confucian canons:

The Master said: “How could consummate conduct (*ren*) be at all remote? No sooner do I seek it than it has arrived.”<sup>17</sup>

The Confucian claim that “everyone can become a sage” is usually read essentialistically as an assertion that the sage is some universally given potential in human nature that if actualized provides a person with those extraordinary talents through which to affect the world in some incomparable way. We have seen that Tang’s processual and provisional understanding of “human nature” precludes this possibility. Indeed, for him this same claim that “everyone can become a sage” is an assertion that the spontaneous emergence of real significance in the ordinary business of the day is itself the meaning and content of sagely virtuosity. Those ordinary persons who in their own lives achieve *real* significance are sages. And given our initial conditions and our cultural resources, all of us have the opportunity to live such significant lives.

## “Family” as the Governing Metaphor

The timelessness and broad application of the teachings of Confucius begins from the insight that the life of almost every human being, regardless of where or when, is played out within the context of their own particular family, for better or for worse. For Confucius and for generations of Chinese that have followed after him, the basic unit of humanity is *this* particular person in *this* particular family rather than either the solitary, discrete individual or the equally abstract and generic notion of family. In fact, in reading Confucius, there is no reference to some core human being – there is no “self,” no “soul,” no discrete “individual” – that remains as who we *really* are once the particular layers of family and community relations are peeled away. Each of us is irreducibly social as the sum of the roles we *live* – not *play* – in our relationships and transactions with others. The goal of living, then, is to achieve harmony and enjoyment for oneself and for others through acting optimally appropriate in those roles and relationships that make us uniquely who we

16 *Zhongyong* 13. See Ames and Hall 2001, 93–94.

17 *Analects* 7.30.

are. The analogy with music here is irresistible. Harmony requires that each component maintain its own integrity and be itself while simultaneously joining in and integrating with the other participants to form a unity distinct from, and more than, the sum of its parts. The unity of each of us emerges as we pursue this inclusive harmony within the orchestra of our roles and relations.

Confucianism is grounded in the everyday lives of the people, and has as its source of animation the natural deference that pervades family living. The centrality of family is for Tang Junyi one of the most profound differences separating the Western and Chinese philosophical narratives.<sup>18</sup> For Confucianism, the meaning and value of family relations is not just the primary ground of social order; for Tang, family relations have cosmological and religious implications as well. Family bonds properly observed are the point of departure for understanding that we each have moral responsibility for an expanding web of relations that reach far beyond our own localized selves.<sup>19</sup>

The profound influence of family on personal development begins from the utter dependency of the infant upon the family relations into which it is born. If infancy teaches us anything, and it teaches us much, its first lesson should be the inescapably interdependent nature of the human experience. Indeed, when his unremarkable student, Zaiwo, resists the burden and inconvenience of the traditional three year mourning period for his parents, Confucius chides him by observing that parents quite literally give to infants three years of themselves, nourishing them and ensuring the continuing viability of their offspring as persons.<sup>20</sup>

The family is conceived as the center of all order, social and cosmic, and as we have seen in the *Great Learning*, all meaning ripples out in concentric circles from personal cultivation within family, and then returns again to nourish this primary source. In fact, if we ask after the meaning of personal “roles” (*lun* 倫) – or perhaps a more primarily gerundive expression of them, “the living of one’s roles and relations” as this process is understood in the classical Chinese language – this character *lun* is one of a family cluster of immediately cognate terms that offer various ways of describing radial order. We might begin from the notion of “a wheel, or taking turns” (*lun* 輪). And the notion of “bonding” in our roles is reinforced by cognates such as “selecting out” (*lun* 揀) and “twisting a cord, the woof” (*lun* 綸). This family of terms share in the association of developing and strengthening a functional pattern of rela-

18 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 210–302. He allows that Aristotle and Hegel do recognize the importance of family as a source of social solidarity, but is critical of their failure to understand the cosmological and religious import of family relations.

19 Tang 1991, vol. 4, 210–215.

20 *Analects* 17.21. The awareness of the dependence of the infant is reinforced by Dewey (1998, 298), “The dependence of habit-forming upon those habits of a group which constitute customs and institutions is a natural consequence of the helplessness of infancy.”

tions and of achieving a desired order. But the dynamic, articulate, and discursive aspects of living our roles are perhaps best captured in cognates such as “conversing, conversation” (*lun* 論), “rippling, ripples” (*lun* 淪), and the root character, “turning over in one’s mind, thoughts, ordering, coherence” (*lun* 侖). Indeed, this root character *lun* 侖 dates back to the oracle bones, and is constructed from an “opened mouth” and “an orderly bundle of bamboo written strips,” suggesting a coherent exposition that elicits from and brings coherence to a particular written document (fig. 1).<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 1: The character *lun* as found in various bronze inscriptions

When we bring these various associations of this family of characters together, the insight gleaned is that the perceived source of growing proper “relations” is fundamentally discursive: an aggregating “relating to” and “giving an account of oneself” within the compass of one’s roles that define family, and by extension, community. Simply put, a thriving, family-based community derives from continuing familial patterns of effective communicating. Said another way, “speaking” family roles in the broadest sense of living them is the ultimate source of coherence and order within the human experience. Family roles as a strategy for getting the most out of relations is thus an inspiration for order more broadly construed – social, political, and cosmic order. We might say that Confucianism is nothing more than a sustained attempt to “family” the lived human experience. For Confucianism, it is through discursive living in a communicating family and community that we are able to enchant the ordinary, to ritualize the routine, to invigorate the familiar, to inspire the customary habits of life, and ultimately, to commune spiritually in the common and the everyday.

## Achieving Personal Identity through Embodiment (*ti* 體) Propriety (*li* 禮)

In attempting to consolidate an understanding of the Confucian notion of personal identity, we might begin from the challenge that William James directs at the familiar “substance” understanding of the “essence” and “attribute” unity of the foundational individual. James uses the analogy of “climate” to illustrate the redundancy that a superordinate substance like “soul” or “self” or “mind” introduces into an analysis of personal identity:

21 See the Kwan web-base under *lun* 侖. Full reference is in books cited at the end of the essay.

The low thermometer to-day, for instance, is supposed to come from something called the “climate.” Climate is really only the name for a certain group of days, but it is treated as if it lay *behind* the day, and in general we place the name, as if it were a being, behind the facts it is the name of. But the phenomenal properties of things [...] do not inhere in anything. They adhere, or cohere, rather, with each other, and the notion of a substance inaccessible to us, which we think accounts for such cohesion by supporting it, as cement might support pieces of a mosaic, must be abandoned. The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all the notion of the substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing.<sup>22</sup>

The Confucian alternative to locating personal identity in some superordinate soul or self or mind is to find this same coherence in the achieved coordination and integration of one’s embodied roles and relations. In the *Zhongyong*, we are told explicitly that family feeling is the ultimate source of the civility and propriety that is fostered within our ritualized roles and institutions:

Consummate conduct (*ren* 仁) means comporting oneself as a human being (*ren* 人), wherein devotion to one’s kin is most important. Appropriateness (*yi* 義) means doing what is fitting (*yi* 宜), wherein esteeming those of superior character and conduct is most important.<sup>23</sup> The degree of devotion due different kin and the degree of esteem accorded those who vary in excellence of character and conduct is what gives rise to the achievement of propriety in our roles and relations (*li* 禮).<sup>24</sup>

Qian Mu 錢穆 insists that these family-based ritualized roles and relationships (*li*) are a cultural identity that must be distinguished fundamentally from the highly variable local customs (*fengsu* 風俗) that separate region from region. For Qian Mu, it is shared *li* rather than different customs that constitute the resilient and enduring fabric of Chinese culture:

You might say that the *jia* [家], or “family,” is the place in Chinese culture where *li* [禮] is transmitted. But it is important to distinguish between *jiating* [家庭], “the family living group,” and *jiazu* [家族], the “family descent group.” It is through the *jiazu* that the standards of social relationships extend beyond the family to relatives. The descent group, which includes the relatives on both sides of the family, can only exist if the standards of *li* are applied. So, when the *li* are extended, a family descent

22 James 2000, 42.

23 Note the paronomastic definitions for *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義 as *ren* 人 and *yi* 宜 respectively: that is, definition by semantic and phonetic association.

24 *Zhongyong* 20. See Ames and Hall 2001, 101. In deference to the Confucian commitment to family as the putative ground of moral sensibilities, we have challenged the conventional translation of the title of this text as “Doctrine of the Mean” with “Focusing the Familiar,” and in so doing, have sought to underscore the cognate relationship between “family” and “familiar.”

group is made, and when they are further extended, a “people’s descent group,” or *minzu* [民族] is made. The Chinese are a *minzu* because the *li* set the standards in social relations for all of the people.<sup>25</sup>

Coordinated family relations (*lun* 倫) then are quite literally the fabric (*lun* 綸) of the Chinese as a particular “people.”

As we have seen, Tang Junyi like Qian Mu affirms the centrality of family feeling as the distinguishing Confucianism value. In so doing, he establishes a contrast with the Western philosophical narrative in which “family” as an institution has not been a significant inspiration for order within the broad sweep of the evolution of Western philosophy and culture. Indeed, we are unable to find any family-centered philosophical notion that is comparable to and that has had the vital importance that “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝) holds for Confucian philosophy. The key characters cognate with the term “family reverence” (*xiao*) are revealing of its invested cultural value. An element in the Chinese character that denotes Confucian “teachings” (*jiao* 教) broadly, for example, is this “intergenerational reverence” (*xiao* 孝) that binds families together through the “respect and emulation” (*xiao* 效) of family models and cultural exemplars.

Using Qian Mu’s language and logic, just as the meaning of the “peoples’ descent group,” the “family descent group,” and the “family living group” are radial extensions from the conduct of particular family members, it is the coherence in the conduct within these embodied roles and relations that constitutes the identity of the particular members themselves. We might use a traditional expression that continues in the modern Chinese language as a heuristic for explicating the fundamental importance of family as ground for the identity of Confucian persons. In English we would say “*everybody* (or *everyone*), please stand up,” using the “body” and a presumed discreteness (“one”) as indices for “person,” thereby reinforcing linguistically an assumption that the “indivisible” individual is the lowest unit in our social organization. By extension we have “anybody, nobody, somebody” (or “anyone, no one, someone”).

In Chinese, however, we would say *dajia qing zhanqilai* 大家請站起來 – literally, “*big family*, please stand up,” suggesting that family relations are perceived as constitutive of our persons, and that indeed it is life within our specific families rather than any single individual that is the lowest social unit. Implicit in this usually unconscious but rather stark contrast between the expressions “everyone” and “big family” (*dajia* 大家) is a fundamental default distinction between, on the one hand, individuated and thus discrete human *beings* who are self-sufficient, and on the other, situated, relational human *becomings* who grow and realize themselves as distinctive persons through a sustained commitment to their always collaborative, transactional roles within the nexus of family and community.

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25 Dennerline 1984, 9.

Applying this Confucian perspective to an understanding of my own person, I might reason that I am certainly incarnate and live my life as an embodied individual, and that my somaticity is integral to my “big family” identity. At the same time I must allow that I am D.C. Lau’s student, and Bonnie’s husband, and Jason and Austin’s father, and Sor-hoon’s old teacher, and Tze-wan and Chan Fai’s friend and colleague, and Henry’s long-time collaborator, and so on – and that these roles and relationships as we have grown them together over a lifetime must also be factored into any adequate understanding of personal identity. After all, these wonderfully satisfying roles and intimate relations are complex and enduring, and are the inspiration that animates my always embodied conduct. In considering personal identity from a Confucian point of view, we must appreciate fully the way in which both our somaticity and our relations with others enables us to achieve and sustain coherence as a person. At the same time, we must resist the familiar, uncritical assumption that being embodied and being “en-roled” necessarily commits us to the notion of superordinate, individual “selves.”

The character for “body” (*ti* 體) that has “bones” (*gu* 骨) as its classifier emerges relatively late in antiquity. Although by the time of the silk manuscripts recovered at Mawangdui in 168 BCE *ti* does occur in this present form, it appears earlier on the bronzes with a “lived body” (*shen* 身) signific (fig. 2a), and then on the bamboo strip manuscripts with a “flesh” (*rou* 肉) signific (fig. 2b). We can use these three alternative classifiers that constitute the different forms of this character as a heuristic for parsing *ti*’s range of meaning. We must allow that *ti* with the “bones” (*gu*) classifier references the “verbal body” as a process of “configuring, embodying, and knowing” the world. *Ti* with the “lived body” (*shen*) classifier references the vital, existentially aware, lived-body in its dynamic social relations with others. And *ti* with the “flesh” (*rou*) classifier references the carnal body – body as flesh and bones. At the most primordial level, the body via these three mutually entailing modalities serves as the bond that conjoins our subjectivity with our environments and that mediates the processes of thinking and feeling with our patterns of conduct.

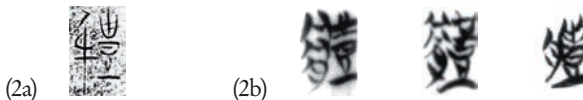


Fig. 2: The character *ti* as found in bronze inscriptions and on bamboo slips

In the Confucian tradition, the body is an inheritance we receive from our families, and as a current in a genealogical stream that reaches back to our most remote ancestors, brings with it a sense of continuity and belonging, and the religious significance such feelings entail. Respect for one’s own body is to show reverence for one’s ancestors; disregard for one’s own body is to bring shame to one’s lineage. As it states in the first chapter of the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經):



Your physical person with its hair and skin is received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins [...].<sup>26</sup>

This responsibility to preserve one's body intact is a major theme throughout the Confucian canons. In the *Record of Rituals*, it says:

The Master said: "Among those things born of the heavens and nurtured by the earth, nothing is grander than the human being. For the parents to give birth to your whole person, and for one to return oneself to them whole is what can be called family reverence. To avoid desecrating your body or bringing disgrace to your person is what can be called keeping your person whole."<sup>27</sup>

Confucius's protégé, Master Zeng, is a name often associated with family reverence (*xiao* 孝) in the canonical literature, and in the *Analects* it is recorded that on his deathbed he said the following:

Master Zeng was ill, and summoned his students to him, saying, "Look at my feet! Look at my hands! The *Book of Songs* says:

Fearful! Trembling!  
As if peering over a deep abyss,  
As if walking across thin ice.<sup>28</sup>

It is only from this moment hence that I can be sure I have avoided desecration of my body, my young friends."<sup>29</sup>

This relationship between the responsibility one has for keeping one's body intact and the appropriate attention to family reverence works in the other direction as well. Traditionally, in the application of penal law (*xing* 刑), amputatory and branding punishments were often meted out for serious crimes as a deliberate strategy for not only alerting the community to the presence of a ne'er-do-well in its midst, but also as a way of assuring that such felons wear their shame before their ancestors in the world beyond.

Nathan Sivin has explored the correlations between body, cosmos, and state in the pre-Qin and early Han dynasties, claiming that "the ideas of Nature, state, and the body were so interdependent that they are best considered a single complex."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the writings ascribed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 are the locus classicus for describing the many correspondences between the human person and the cosmos –

26 See Rosemont and Ames 2009.

27 Lau 1992. *Liji* 25.36/128/6.

28 *Songs* 195.

29 *Analects* 8.3.

30 See Sivin 1995, 5.

between the microcosm and the macrocosm.<sup>31</sup> Therein Dong describes not only associations between the changing seasons of the year and the rise and fall of the human passions, but he also explores the many ostensive correlations between the anatomy and physiology of the human body and the structure of the material cosmos.<sup>32</sup> Further, early in the tradition an elaborate vocabulary evolved that associates specific family relations with different parts of the body: the “living person” (*shengshen* 生身) is a metaphor for one’s parents, “bones and flesh” (*gurun* 骨肉) for one’s children, “hands and feet” (*shouzu* 手足) for one’s brothers, “stomach and heart-mind” (*foxin* 腹心) for one’s friends, and “of the same womb” (*tongbao* 同胞) for one’s countrymen.<sup>33</sup>

In the *Book of Rites* and several other canonical texts, there is a further correlation pursued in associating the proper structure of the cosmos (*li* 理) as a whole with propriety in human roles and relations (*li* 禮), suggesting that human morality has its counterpart in the harmonious workings of the cosmos. What is significant in this reflection on our embodied persons is that physically, socially, and religiously, our bodies are a specific matrix of nested relations and functions, and are invariably a collaboration between our persons and our many environments. No “body” – not the vital, the social, or the carnal – does anything by itself.

In this Confucian tradition, we might say that “body” (*ti* 體) and its cognate character “achieved propriety in one’s roles and relations” (*li* 禮) express two ways of looking at the same phenomenon: that is, they reference a living body and embodied living respectively. As it states in the *Book of Rites*:

Now the great body of ritual proprieties (*li zhi dati* 禮之大體) embodies (*ti* 體) the heavens and the earth, emulates the four seasons, takes *yin* and *yang* as its standard, comports with human feeling, and is thus called “ritual proprieties (*li* 禮).” As for those who would denigrate it, they have no idea where these ritual proprieties come from.<sup>34</sup>

Peter Boodberg in searching for the common ground shared by these cognates *ti* and *li* allows that

Form, that is, organic form [...] appears to be the link between the two words, as evidenced by the ancient Chinese scholiasts who repeatedly used *t’i* [*ti*] to define *li* in their glosses.<sup>35</sup>

31 For example, *Chunqiu fanlu* 23 and 46.

32 *Chunqiu fanlu* 56.

33 See Zhang Zailin 2008, 20–22.

34 Lau 1992, *Liji* 50.1/174/18: 凡禮之大體，體天地，法四時，則陰陽，順人情，故謂之禮。譬之者是不知禮之所由生也。

35 Boodberg 1953, 326. This might explain the abbreviated graph for *ti* 體 that is constituted by “person” (*ren* 人) and “root or trunk” (*ben* 本) as *ti* 体. See Ames (1993), 169.

Deborah Sommer goes back to the usages of *ti* in the *Book of Odes* to expand upon this organic meaning of *ti*:

[...] as a polysemous corpus of indeterminate extent that can be partitioned into subtler units, each of which is often analogous to the whole and shares a fundamental substantiality and common identity with that whole. [...] When a *ti* body is fragmented into parts (literally or conceptually), each part retains, in certain aspects, a kind of wholeness or becomes a simulacra of the larger entity of which it is a constituent.<sup>36</sup>

This abstract understanding of *ti* is derived from its association in the early literature with vegetable propagation that is “accomplished not with seeds but by dividing the roots, stems, tubers or other fleshy parts of plants into segments that are then replanted to develop into ‘new plants.’”<sup>37</sup> Sommer observes that “for people of an agriculturally based society, the notion that plants can be multiplied through vegetative division would have been a commonplace.”<sup>38</sup> There is both continuity and origination in the process of sprouting potatoes being dissected and grown again, of the inedible crowns of pineapples producing their next generation of fruit, and of the unusable roots of defoliated coriander and scallions generating a new harvest of leaves and stems.

In her survey of this early literature, Sommer concludes that “*ti* bodies often act more like plants than like humans.”<sup>39</sup> But I would not find the same contrast between humans and plants here. Indeed I would want to take her analysis a step further as a real insight into the early Chinese way of thinking about human genealogical continuity itself, giving us an opportunity to extrapolate from horticulture to human culture. Another of Tang Junyi’s propositions that he uses to describe Chinese natural cosmology is “the inseparability of the one and the many, of uniqueness and multivalence, of continuity and multiplicity, of integrity and integration” (*yiduo bufenguan* 一多不分觀).<sup>40</sup> If we take human procreativity as an illustration of this proposition, such a characterization is another way of affirming *pai-sheng* 派生, the genealogical derivation of a distinctive and uniquely “one” person. At the same time, within the ongoing, ceaseless process of shaping and being shaped called *huasheng* 化生, the “many” progenitors persist and live on in this process of transformation into someone else. That is, while persons emerge to become specifically who they are as individuals, the parents and grandparents of such individuals continue to live on in them, just as these new individuals too will live on in their progeny. The focus-field language that we have proposed as a way of thinking about

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36 Sommer 2008, 294.

37 Sommer 2008, 295.

38 Sommer 2008, 296.

39 Sommer 2008, 294.

40 Tang 1991, vol. 11, 16–17.

the relationship between particulars and the totality seems immediately relevant to the kind of holography Sommer alludes to when she says that

[e]ach new plant in some sense is still the parent plant, and there exists a material continuity of identity from one life form to the next. [...] Mother and daughter plants are at once autonomous and yet consubstantial.<sup>41</sup>

We might take a clarification of this *ti* genealogy yet another step. This process of division, diffusion, and derivation can be further illuminated if we reflect upon the complex transmission of always embodied knowledge from generation to succeeding generation. The body is the site of a conveyance of the cultural corpus of knowledge – linguistic facility and proficiency, religious rituals and mythologies, the aesthetics of cooking, song, and dance, the modeling of mores and values, instruction and apprenticeship in cognitive technologies, and so on – as a continuing, intergenerational process through which a living civilization itself is perpetuated.

Turning to *li* 禮, the communal *shen* 身 body is diffused in the dynamic, ritualized roles and relations that constitute it, and just as the *ti* body does not carry with it a superordinate notion of “self” or “soul” – some ghost in the machine – likewise achieved propriety in living one’s roles and relations that complements this body in constituting one’s person is also primordial. That is, the quality of one’s conduct is not mediated by or reduplicated in some notion of a discrete “agent” or “character” that would isolate and locate persons outside of their social and natural relations. Instead, the identity of persons lies in the achieved amalgamation, the integration, and the sustained coherence of their continuing habits of conduct within the embodied roles that constitute them.

These roles have their beginnings in “family reverence”, and are then extended by a process of quite literally bringing the community home through surrogate family relations.<sup>42</sup> We perform our various roles, and these same roles in turn are forming of us as persons. Tang Junyi describes the function of *li* in the following terms:

When the “Ritualizing Experience” (*liyün* 禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites* discusses the ideal of the era of Great Harmony (*datong* 大同), what is intended is simply that everyone should get what they deserve. Herein the concepts of propriety (*li*) and appropriateness (*yi*) are subsumed under the concept of person. As such, persons in the process of realizing this purpose must participate fully and appropriately in their

41 Sommer 2008, 296.

42 Henry Rosemont and I have translated the term *xiao* as “familial reverence” rather than “filial piety.” The virtue of “family reverence” as a translation is that it in degree disassociates *xiao* from the duty to God implied by “piety” and from the top-down obedience that is assumed in *paterfamilias*. “Family reverence” also has the virtue of retaining the sacred connotations and bottom-up direction of *xiao* that might have originally referred to a specific ancestral sacrifice. Cf. Rosemont and Ames 2009.

symbiotic ritualized roles and relations before each person can get what they should get out of these relationships.<sup>43</sup>

Tang herein is rehearsing a proposition found also in the *Analects* that insists that any real harmony must be mediated through a robust sense of propriety in the roles and relations that situate us within family and community:

Achieving harmony (*he* 和) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety in our roles and relations (*li* 禮). In the ways of the Former Kings, this achievement of harmony through observing propriety made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small. But when things are not going well, to realize harmony just for its own sake without regulating the situation through observing propriety will not work.<sup>44</sup>

We might appeal to the pragmatic conception of relational person as both an associative and contrastive analogy that can serve us in bringing this Confucian version of relationally constituted person into clearer resolution. John Dewey in his phenomenology of human conduct combines the process psychology of William James and the social psychology of George Herbert Mead to locate persons within their natural and social relations. As Mead insists, “self” is coterminous with the world:

The self cannot arise in experience except as there are others there. The child experiences sounds, etc., before it has experience of its own body; there is nothing in the child that arises as his own experience and then is referred to the outside things. [...] Only a superficial philosophy demands the old view that we start with ourselves. [...] There is no self before there is a world, and no world before the self. The process of the formation of the self is social.<sup>45</sup>

These pragmatists are revolutionary in dispensing with the “old psychology” that begins from assumptions about a superordinate and discrete *psyche*. As Dewey observes:

The doctrine of a single, simple and indissoluble soul was the cause and the effect of failure to recognize that concrete habits are the means of knowledge and thought. Many who think themselves scientifically emancipated and who freely advertise the soul for a superstition, perpetuate a false notion of what knows, that is, of a separate knower.<sup>46</sup>

Dewey instead, in a different language but still analogous in many ways to the Confucian notion of relationally constituted persons, arrives at an understanding of person as a dynamic combination of habit and impulse:

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43 Tang 1991, vol. 15, 99.

44 *Analects* 1.12.

45 Mead 1982, 156.

46 Dewey 1922, 176.

Now it is dogmatically stated that no such conceptions of the seat, agent or vehicle will go psychologically at the present time. Concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done. "Consciousness," whether as a stream or as special sensations and images, expresses the functions of habits, phenomena of their formation, operation, their interruption and reorganization. [...] A certain delicate combination of habit and impulse is requisite for observation, memory and judgment.<sup>47</sup>

Where Confucian role ethics departs from and stands in plain contrast to the pragmatists is in requiring that certain basic moral considerations be located within the arena of family life. For example, while the pragmatists have to develop a revised understanding of the familiar liberal vocabulary of freedom, equality, and justice, these terms do not appear in the Confucian texts because such abstractions along with the notions of moral principle, values, and virtues, are located in and defined by actual life experience within one's specific roles and relations in family and community.

### Making Sense of the Notions of "Root," "Source," "Potential," and "Cause"

In the canonical Confucian texts, the familiar appeal to the horticultural and husbanding metaphors – knowing the "root" – is often construed as reinforcing the idea that specific plants and animals grow to become what they essentially are: They simply actualize their inherent potential. But what makes horticulture and husbanding apposite analogies for relationally constituted "human becomings" is in fact their acute dependence upon a contrived environment and upon concentrated human effort. Without sustained intervention, most seeds far from becoming what they "are," become anything 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. The "root" or "seed" of anything and what it will become is as much a function of the contingencies of circumstances as it is of the initial conditions from which it "begins."

Further, when *xing* 性 is frequently described as the "root" (*ben* 本) that nourishes our human behavior, we must consider that a root cannot in anyway be conceived as independent of the other elements that together constitute the organic process of becoming human. This interpretation would take nature and nurture as interdependent and correlative categories, rendering them symbiotic and mutually entailing. In the ecological cosmology that gives this tradition context, one must

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47 Dewey 1922, 176–177.



understand the root in terms of the whole process of becoming a tree, and must reflect on the nature of a person or any particular thing as the ongoing outcome of the total dynamic pattern of its relationships. The tree is an organic whole, and while the root may be thought to grow the tree, the tree in turn grows its root. A poem by Tanya Storch comes to mind:

roots are branches  
under ground  
boughs are roots  
into the sky

Turning to the notion of “source,” “*dao* 道” is often described as a “source” and might shed light on how “source” is to be understood when ascribed to “human nature.” The conventional understanding of “source” is that it is the point of origin as opposed to what is derived from that point. In nature, the source of the Yangtze river is the Himalayas. When we introduce the idea of efficient cause, the source becomes something that causes, creates, initiates. It is a maker from which whatever is made, derives. These notions of “source” have no relevance for *dao*. *Dao*, far from standing independent of the world we experience, is in fact the unsummed totality of all that is happening. *Dao* is the process of the world in its entirety.

To understand the notion of “source” relevant to *dao* we might cite the *Daodejing* that states: “*Dao* emulates what is spontaneously so of itself.”<sup>48</sup> The energy of growth and transformation resides within the world itself, wherein the entire field of what is happening is implicated in each relationally constituted event.

Bringing this rather abstract reflection to bear on how we are to understand “human nature” as the “source” of what we become as humans, we would have to allow that human nature is a provisional generalization made with respect to the totality of human lives as they have been lived within their natural and social relations. The contingency of what humans have become is no less relevant to this notion of source than where they have come from. The source is the collaborative nature of relations themselves *and* what is produced in this collaboration. In becoming human as in making friends, there is no separation between maker and made, between means and end, between cause and effect, between source and product.

Further, we might clarify the notion of “potential” to underscore the inseparability of person and context in this Confucian conception of persons. The “potential” for becoming human is not simply the first inklings, something inborn “within” the person exclusive of family relations. In the first place, there is no such person. Since persons are constituted by their relations, the “potential” of a person in fact emerges *pari passu* from out of the specific, contingent transactions that, in

48 *Daodejing* 25 道法自然.

the fullness of time, eventuate in this particular person in this particular family. Thus, the best sense we can make of “potential” here is that rather than being ready-made, it evolves with the ever changing circumstances; rather than being generic or universal, it is always unique to the career of the relational person; and rather than existing as an inherent and defining endowment, it can only be known *post hoc* after the unfolding of the particular narrative.<sup>49</sup> The argument, then, is that the preponderance of the content of “human nature” (*renxing*) as it is expressed in the habitude of “consummatory conduct” (*ren*), “acting optimally appropriate in meaningful relations” (*yi*), “achieving propriety in roles and relations” (*li*), and “acting with intelligence and wisdom” (*zhi*) is acquired. “Natural tendencies” (*xing*) are no more an essential and inborn given than is “consummatory conduct”. Both are a source and a product: that is, the articulation of tentative native conditions in the robust consequences of habituation. “Acting with wisdom” is not applying wisdom to a situation, but a condition of acting that arises with the efficacy of one’s actions.

What makes the “human nature” most profoundly variable is the quality of the families and cultures into which we are born. If the family is a morally strong, thriving association of significant persons within a mature culture, much is available for investment in and growth for the incipient person. If the family is barren and troubled within only a thinly cultured environment, it is a more difficult road for the emerging person. But even when the legendary Shun is born into the family of the morally deficient Blind Man, the model of Emperor Yao is still available as part of a rich cultural resource that enables Shun through the assiduous cultivation of habits of conduct to become a sage himself. Shun’s circumstances are a fair demonstration that there are cultural assets available for everyone to draw upon in aspiring to become sagely in their conduct.

The basic significance of the mantra, “the continuity between the numinous and the human” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) that is invoked to describe the Confucian religious sensibility is making this same point about potential. It is the person nourished by culture who becomes consummately human, and it is the life of the consummate human who contributes to the cultural resources that make a consummate humanity possible. Potentiality emerges in these collaborations between aspiring persons and an inspired world.

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49 For Dewey (1998, 223) too, “potentialities cannot be known till after the interactions have occurred. There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted.” Lincoln is not Lincoln independent of the circumstances of history, nor are the circumstances of history the making of Lincoln. Indeed, Lincoln is a collaboration between person and circumstances expressed as thick habits of conduct. “The idea that potentialities are inherent and fixed by relation to a predetermined end was a product of a highly restricted state of technology.”

Turning to causality then, given the constitutive nature of relations, causality is not some agency outside and prior to the perceived configuration of things happening, but rather a function of the creative and thus causal nature of the relations themselves. The originally militarist notion of causality captured in the term *shi* 勢 comes immediately to mind. *Shi* describes the always particular and inclusive manifold of spatial, temporal, and existential factors as they unfold in an emerging situation. *Shi* is a calculus of differentials in configuration, momentum, timing, terrain, morale, equipment, logistics, and so on.

There is a fallacy in taking human nature as causal in the sense that it reduplicates itself in action – the idea that our conduct is *ren* because we are potentially *ren*. Rather habits of moral conduct and native conditions should be understood as symbiotic and mutually determining. When we ask: Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? we have to allow that they come together or not at all. From the perspective of classical Western metaphysics, we might say that Chinese cosmology shaves with Ockham's razor not once, but twice. Chinese cosmology does not appeal to the notion of a transcendent and independent God as the source of the world, but begins from what is happening in the autogenerative world itself (*ziran* 自然). And Chinese cosmology does not appeal to an independent nature or soul as the source of human conduct, but begins from a phenomenology of what unfolds and aggregates as moral habits within human conduct itself.

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