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## Introduction

It is indisputable that there is much wrong with the world today. Many people of good will think the problems are basically political and economic, but both of us believe that the politics and economics are embedded in a conceptual framework of moralities grounded in one type of foundational individualism or another, none of which are even capable of addressing those problems any longer, much less contribute to their solutions. Thus we believe that new moralities are needed (containing some very old elements), with intellectual and psychological resources that more closely resemble the hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations of actual people than the deracinated individuals who currently populate our patterns of moral thinking. For us, a role ethics largely inspired by the canons of classical Confucian philosophy, suitably modified for our modern sensibilities, presents one such conceptual framework for grounding a morality appropriate for the present day. And more than that, such a role ethic can appeal to what are referred to as liberals and conservatives alike, with room as well for both the faithful and the skeptics, proffering as it does a vision of the good life for human beings that can provide useful guidelines for addressing our political, economic, environmental – and perhaps even spiritual – problems, in a more cooperative manner, without any necessary theological grounding.

That we are all social creatures, strongly influenced by the others with whom we interact, has been acknowledged broadly by philosophers of all persuasions. But within our classical and modern discourse, there are reasons why this social dimension has been marginalized and rarely seen as being of the essence of our humanity at the moral and political (and ontological) level. On this view, our social selves cannot be of compelling worth because our concrete circumstances are in an important sense accidental in that we have exercised no control over them – that is, we are not responsible for who our parents are, the native languages we speak, our ethnicity, and so forth. Consequently, what does give human beings their primary worth, their dignity, their integrity, and their value – and what must command the respect of all – is their ability to act purposively and to exercise their capacity for self-determination, that is, their *autonomy*. And

of course, in order for human beings to be truly autonomous, they must neither be coerced nor governed by instinct or passion. That is, they must be *free* and *rational* in the choices that they make. But this view of human beings is not the only one that can accord dignity and respect to everyone.

## The Genesis of Confucian Role Ethics

We both came to Confucian role ethics as an alternative to autonomous individualism through our study of classical Confucian texts, and then later when we worked closely together over a number of years on Confucian translation and interpretation projects. The concept of role ethics had its genesis in a paper Rosemont wrote in 1991 for a *Festschrift* in honor of Herbert Fingarette wherein he suggested that seeing the Chinese as flesh and blood role-bearers rather than potential candidates to be abstract rights-holders might give Western-trained philosophers a better background for reading early Confucian texts. Ames then began to work with the idea for developing an ethics of roles in some depth, contextualizing it within the centrality of family as the governing metaphor in Chinese culture. Rosemont then picked up on Ames's discussions of family in his search for an appropriate English vocabulary to describe such a morality since it was without counterpart in the history of Western ethics. And Rosemont further addressed his cudgel to retrofit the Chinese lexicon and thereby allow the early Confucians to speak more clearly and faithfully in their own voices while at the same time expressing views applicable to our present conditions. Ames developed the notion of *paranomasia* to explain how the Chinese lexicon makes its meaning, and Rosemont moved from thinking of concepts and words to think more of concept-clusters, especially, but not confined to terms central for philosophers, especially as they are seen as definitive of ethics, politics and religion. It is largely against this background of the three shared interrelated themes – role ethics, family, and language/translation – that our collaborative efforts are best understood: two textual translations (the *Analects of Confucius* and the *Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*), our joint articles, and two separately authored books, Ames's *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (2011) and Rosemont's *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family and Religion* (2015).

At first we attempted to articulate Confucian role ethics somewhat unreflectively in terms that could conceivably be descriptive of free, autonomous individual selves as well as role-bearers – even though we became increasingly suspicious of the former – especially as we embarked upon our translation of the *Analects*. Our suspicions were confirmed fairly quickly after we began the work, encountering two major difficulties: (1) while passages in the text pertaining to

the conduct of human beings as role-bearers abound, we could find none that describe the activities of these role-bearing persons in terms of freedom or autonomy, and very few in which any of the participants are not discussed in terms of close relationships to others; and (2) as we continued to think about and develop the notion of role ethics, and began to speak of human “beings” as always “*becoming*,” we found less work for the concept of the free, autonomous, and rationally choosing individual self to do, or even to *be*. Instead, it increasingly seemed to us that describing the proper performances of persons in their various roles and the appropriate attitude expressed in such roles in their relationship to others with whom they are engaged, sufficed to articulate an ethics that seemed both to give the greatest consistency and coherence to the text, and also to conform to our own everyday experience much better than those abstract accounts reflected in the writings of the heroes of Western moral philosophy, past and present.

By the time we came to translate the *Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, we were willing to jettison the concept of the free and autonomous individual altogether for several reasons. First, we became increasingly puzzled when trying to make clear sense of what it would mean to be a free and autonomous individual self – apart from the habits of an old psychology – supported in our growing doubts by much recent work in the neurosciences and social psychology, as well as in philosophy. Second, we were able to begin work with both the Chinese and English languages to try to capture the vision of Confucius as we saw it without doing violence to the text, and to explicate more generally what an ethics of roles might be like.

Third, we came to the philosophical position, and began arguing for the idea that an insistence on the paramouncy of individual freedom in ethical and political theories – and instantiated in democratic societies – was purchased at the expense of equality and social justice, as libertarians have been (unintentionally) making increasingly clear, especially in the U.S. Consequently, we found that all moral arguments for equality and social justice grounded in the concept of individual freedom could be met by counter arguments equally moral. Moreover, although our interpreting the *Analects* as a role ethics met with some initial skepticism, we have not been persuaded by any of the critiques of what might be wrong with our translations of the text or our interpretations of it, and that has held for our *Chinese Classic of Family Reverence* efforts as well. Further, if we are correct in our claim that championing the freedom and autonomy of individuals has come at the expense of social justice, then clearly we would not be doing the early Confucians any favors by attributing a concept of autonomous individualism to them.

And finally, a fourth reason for abandoning the fiction of the autonomous individual is that it seemed increasingly to be the case that all of the important

good work done by deontological, consequentialist, or virtue ethics based on individualism could also be captured by an ethics of roles, and hence Confucius did not have to be seen as a marginal, second-class moral philosopher. The concept of human beings as free, autonomous individuals could thus be dispensed with by one pass of Ockham's razor.

Believing that every society worth living in must be characterized by a robust sense of social justice and a fair measure of economic equality, we have thus been led in recent work to abandon altogether *every* ethical theory grounded in what we have come to call a default "foundational individualism" that would include care ethics, Marxism, and the communal anarchism of Peter Kropotkin no less than the strictly individualist version of Max Stirner, and almost all other philosophers in between, otherwise as disparate as Rousseau, Rawls, Sandel, MacIntyre, Susan Okin, and Charles Taylor. If we are correct that all ethics and politics grounded in the freedom and autonomy of individuals hinders significantly the achievement of social justice in a society, and if many of the horrors confronting the world today have the social injustices of poverty and inequality as their root cause, then, to repeat, it becomes clear to us that we do no favors to the early Confucians to ascribe to them an individualist foundation to their thinking, for they then can have little to say about solving contemporary world problems, and we would be reduced to reading the *Analects* for its antiquarian interest.

We may be wrong in some or all of these beliefs. It may be the case that there is an ethics and politics grounded in individualism that can indeed claim the moral high ground for social justice and wealth redistribution, and we would urge those colleagues so persuaded to continue to attempt to develop their ideas. But because we believe that foundational individualism is a major *cause* of our contemporary malaise we are not optimistic that any theory accepting it can contribute to its cure; thus far we have not seen any plausible candidates, and until we do, we will continue to push the envelope for an ethics and politics grounded in the roles lived by interrelated persons, whose sole constant is change.

## Why not Autonomous Individualism?

The need for us to pursue what we might alternatively call a narrative notion of person arises from the fact that the concept of the autonomous individual underlying modern moral and political philosophy has come to have at least four pernicious effects. First, it enables libertarian capitalists, growing in their numbers in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, to claim moral purchase in justifying an unfettered human freedom as the basis and ultimate source of political justice, and on that basis, to then reject any conception of justice that retards such freedom as fundamentally immoral. The notion of the individual so defined thus

continues to provide a moral basis for a more or less *laissez-faire* global free market capitalist economy that is compounding exponentially the gross inequities in human well-being within, between, and beyond modern nation states. And as long as the conservatives, liberals, communitarians, and socialists alike all continue to ground their objections to libertarianism in their own version of the same autonomous individual, the libertarian will always be able to counter their challenges and remain above moral reproach.

The second related reason that the concept of the autonomous individual is pernicious is its monopoly on the consciousness of Western intellectuals. The foundational individual is entrenched at a depth that makes it almost impossible for us to see any alternative to an individualism so defined except that of a more or less faceless collectivism in a decidedly post-Marxist era. It has become extraordinarily difficult within our political and ethical discourse to view human beings (including ourselves, of course) in any way other than as free, autonomous, and rational (and usually self-interested) individuals, making it equally difficult to act on any other basis. Indeed, the assumption that the essential characteristics and actions of human beings are best understood by regarding them as fundamentally free, autonomous, and rational individuals has in the sense of brooking no alternatives, become a default, uncritical ideology. And from this ideological perspective, social relations and actions will be seen as justifiable – that is, as being just – only to the extent that they are agreed to by individuals so described.

Thus, within this ideology, community is not the natural state of and for human beings, but only the artificial construct of otherwise discrete individuals. And again within this contractarian ideology, while procedure and retribution play a dominant if not definitive role in our regnant conceptions of justice, any effort to pursue social justice that challenges personal autonomy becomes contentiously dismissed as European “socialism,” and any gesture made in the direction of restorative justice will likely be perceived as undeserving of such a description. And so long as this ideology of the individual holds us in its orbit, it will be impossible to be objective or impartial in evaluating any conception of justice or of any notion of the human being that underlies such a concept of justice that has the temerity to take issue with autonomous individualism.

A third corollary of foundational individualism is that ironically, it does not make good on its promises. Stated simply, acting to advance one’s own self-interest at the expense of others seldom serves those same interests, and acting altruistically to serve the interests of others at one’s own expense in the end gives the other very little. Drinking a fine bottle of wine by oneself is not as enjoyable as sharing it with good friends, and to the extent the self-abnegation is entailed by altruism, the “other” receives only diminishing returns. We will see in a Confucian conception of the relationally constituted conception of a person, a good

teacher and a good student can only emerge together, and your welfare and the welfare of you neighbor are coterminous and mutually entailing.

The fourth pernicious effect of an entrenched individualism and perhaps its most visible detriment is that there is an aura of the self-fulfilling prophecy that haloes this ideology: The more we have come to see ourselves as autonomous individuals contracting with others in service to our own self-interests, the more we have come to act as, and ultimately, to become just such individuals. The degree of angst, alienation, and violence that has become characteristic of contemporary urban living is a direct consequence of our dysfunctional families and our failure to transform mere associated living into communities of shared values and interests.

## Why Confucian Role Ethics?

The starting point is simple. In Confucian role ethics, association is a fact. We do not live our lives inside our skins. Everything we do – physically, psychologically, socially – is resolutely transactional and collaborative. And the roles we live are simply the way in which this fact of association is further stipulated and specified. Confucian role ethics appeals to specific roles for stipulating the forms that association take within lives lived in family and community – that is, the various roles we live as sons and teachers, grandmothers and neighbors. For Confucianism, not only are these roles descriptive of our associations, but once stipulated, they are also prescriptive in the sense that roles in family and community are themselves normative, guiding us in the direction of appropriate conduct. One is a good or bad spouse, and a good or bad teacher. Whereas mere association is a given, flourishing families and communities are what we are able to make of this associative condition as the highest human achievement.

Confucian role ethics has a holistic and compelling vision of the moral life that is grounded in and is responsible to our empirical experience. First, Confucian role ethics would insist on the primacy of vital relationships, and would preclude any notion of final individuality. Personal discreteness is a conceptual abstraction and strict autonomy a misleading fiction; association is a fact. And giving up the notion of a superordinate “self,” far from surrendering one’s personal uniqueness, in fact, enhances it. That is, the “natural kinds” talk that usually stands behind claims about a shared human nature and a concomitant essential self mitigates the degree of difference we find in a Confucian notion of person where person is constituted by a dynamic manifold of always specific relations.

Secondly, Confucian role ethics resists the uncritical substance ontology underlying a conception of agency that requires a separation between the agent of

conduct and the conduct itself. The notion of *ren* 仁 that is central to Confucian role ethics entails no such agency/action dichotomy. *Ren* requires a narrative rather than an analytic understanding of person. And *ren* is cultivated by correlating one's own conduct with those models close at hand rather than by acting in concert with some abstract moral principles. It is for this reason that it is often unclear whether *ren* denotes a consummate person or the conduct of such a person, or like its cognate *ren* 人, whether the referent is singular or plural. *Ren* is an open-ended generalization made off of particular historical accomplishments of consummate conduct rather than referencing some innate and essential element that is characteristic of all members of the set called human "beings." Indeed, *ren* is a gerundive notion – a verbal noun – that is descriptive of consummate "person-ing."

Thirdly, Confucian role ethicists appreciate the dramatic role that body has as integral to achieving personal identity and consummate conduct – the body as the root or trunk through which human conduct, being nourished and grown, becomes refulgent. It is no coincidence that the simplified graph for body 體 is 体 – that is, quite literally, the graphic denotation of the root and stem of a person. The body – always a collaboration between person and world, between organism and environment – is at once carnal and vital, seen and lived, receptive and responsive. Not only does the world shape the body, but through our bodily sensorium we structure, conceptualize, and theorize our world of experience. Indeed, it is because the body is the medium through which our ancestors and their culture live on in us that keeping one's body intact has been the first among the several precepts of family reverence (*xiao* 孝).

Fourthly, Confucian role ethics emphasizes the vital role that the process of moral imagination plays in consummate thinking and living. In Confucian role ethics, it is our educated imagination that, drawing upon all of our human resources, defers action until we can conjure forth the full range of possibilities that allows for optimal growth in our relationships. And said plainly, it is this growth in relationships that is the very substance of morality.

And finally, Confucian role ethics does not compete with virtue ethics or any other ethical *theory* but is rather a vision of the moral life that resists the theoretical/practical divide. When we read the Confucian canons, the expectation is that while we certainly can appropriate a cluster of terms that enable a critical reflection on our conduct, we ought, more fundamentally, to be inspired by the exhortations and the models of the cultural heroes to become better people.

## Documenting the Genesis of Confucian Role Ethics

The eight essays gathered here represent the evolution of our joint efforts to simultaneously develop our two basic theses: first, that classical Confucianism is best interpreted as being fundamentally an ethics of roles rather than principles or character traits, and that it is *sui generis* with no close Western counterpart. And second, that this role ethics, appropriately modified, can encompass all of the good work done by the standard ethical theories while avoiding their shortcomings, and for this reason, is perhaps singularly suited to attract our allegiance today. That is, while individualism of any sort has in our opinion exhausted its usefulness, the standard proffered alternative of a Marxist, Stalinist, or Fascist collectivism is certainly not a worthy candidate to succeed it.

All of the following essays were originally invited, some to appear in anthologies, others to be read at conferences and later to be published as proceedings volumes. They span a quarter of a century in terms of when they were first written, with the bulk of them composed between 2008 and 2013. These essays appear here in only rough chronological order because we thought it better as much as possible to group them by major theme.

The first essay, “Translation and Interpretation” was first given by us jointly at a conference organized by Frank Kraushaar on the topic of Western approaches to East Asian cultures held at the University of Riga, Latvia, in 2008. We wanted to begin the present volume with this essay because it is a fairly clear statement of our methodological assumptions and our approach to comparative philosophy in general, and to the parsing of Chinese materials in particular.

The second essay, “Rights-bearing Individuals and Role-bearing Persons” was originally written by Rosemont as a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Herbert Fingarette, *Rules, Rituals and Responsibility*, edited by Mary Bockover. Written in 1990 and published a year later, it turned out to be the first in a series of works we did both together and separately, developing the idea of viewing the early Confucian thinkers as concerned much more with an ethics of roles than of principles.

The third essay, published in a special issue of *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* devoted to the dispute then going on in China about the relation of “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝) to “consummate person/conduct” (*ren* 仁) was the first appearance of “family reverence” instead of “filial piety” as translation for *xiao* in our work, and “consummatory person/conduct” for *ren* instead of “authoritative person/conduct,” or something similar. This paper, modified and expanded significantly, became the motive force for what was to be published a year later as *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing*. And a follow-up to the third essay is the fourth, a more recent discussion of *xiao*, “Family Reverence (*xiao*) in the *Analects*: Confucian Role

Ethics and the Dynamics of Intergenerational Transmission.” It is one of a collection of articles on Confucius and the *Analects* gathered and edited by Amy Olberding.

The fifth essay, still dealing largely with the family and family reverence, is Rosemont’s contribution to the 2012 Conference at Alet-les-Bains on the topic of “Landscape and Traveling East and West: A Philosophical Journey.” Rosemont focused on the family and travel through time rather than space, and his presentation was followed immediately by Ames, whose presentation on that same occasion is the final work in this present volume.

Interpreting Confucianism as a role ethics remains a controversial claim among many of our comparativist colleagues. The next two essays are devoted to arguing not only for our claim, but also *against* other interpretations. Essay six: “Were the Early Confucians Virtuous?” – argues that Western interpretations of Chinese ethics follows the Anscombe turn from rule-based ethics to virtue ethics in our own academy, and is not the best reading of the early Confucian texts, however *au courant* virtue ethics may be in contemporary Western moral philosophy.

Essay seven is our contribution to another *Festschrift*, this one for our dear friend Joel Kupperman that was edited by two of his students, Chenyang Li and Peimin Ni. The thrust of our contribution is evident in the title: “From Kupperman’s Character Ethics to Confucian Role Ethics: Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again.”

The final and concluding article in this collection is the paper Ames presented at the Alet conference in 2012 immediately after Rosemont: “Travelling with *Gravitas*: The Intergenerational Transmission of Chinese Culture.” In this essay, Ames moves from treating the family and family memory through time to the intergenerational project of acquiring, enhancing and transmitting culture through time. At the outset Ames suggests that our collaborative efforts to interpret Confucianism for a Western audience – namely, the nature of our work, and the fact of doing much of it together – is at the heart of the Confucian persuasion as we believe it is best interpreted. This is, to say the least, a rather unusual sort of philosophical claim, but Rosemont stands by Ames in proffering it, for we both believe we are better people for having worked with each other while exploring and writing about Confucian role ethics, forging our Way in the world together.

Several of our claims are made in more than one of the articles in this volume because the papers were originally presented to different audiences at different times, and we believed it best not to alter them for this reprinting.

