

high praise, according to this one exceptional student alone the description of being consummate in his conduct (*ren*)⁷⁶ and of being truly fond of learning (*haaxue*).⁷⁷ Indeed, he places Yan Hui far above himself and everyone else in his capacity for learning:

The Master remarked to Zigong, "Comparing yourself with Yan Hui, who is the better person?" Zigong replied, "How dare I have such expectations. With Yan Hui, learning one thing he will know ten; with me, learning one thing I will know two." The Master said, "You are not his match. Neither you nor I are a match for Yan Hui."⁷⁸

Of course, "learning" here has an immediate moral and religious reference to personal growth achieved through assiduous cultivation and a demonstrated relational virtuosity in family and community. Confucius himself, far from being mysterious and aloof with his students, is candid about the limits of the mentorship that he can offer them:

The Master said, "My young friends, you think that I have something hidden away, but I do not. There is nothing I do that I do not share with you—this is the person I am."⁷⁹

At the same time, Confucius insists that it is one's contribution to the community rather than one's seniority that is deserving of deference. And he encourages an appropriate respect for the as-yet undisclosed potential and possibilities that might well attend the next generation:

The Master said, "The young should be held in high esteem. After all, how do we know that those yet to come will not surpass our contemporaries? It is only when one reaches forty or fifty years of age and yet has done nothing of note that we should withhold our esteem."⁸⁰

Given Confucius's critical attitude toward his contemporaries and his judicious admiration for the ways in which his students excel, we can surmise that his strict understanding of a mentoring friendship is more a matter of substantial difference than it is of hierarchical superiority. After all, since good teachers learn much from good students, we would have to conclude that on his own premises, Confucius would allow that students too can be a source of meaningful friendship. This would certainly seem to have been the case in his fervent admiration for Yan Hui:

When Yan Hui died, the Master grieved for him with sheer abandon. His followers cautioned, "Sir, you grieve with such abandon." The Master replied, "I grieve with abandon? If I don't grieve with abandon for him, then for whom?"⁸¹

The Embeddedness and Growth of "Human Becomings"

As we have seen, in this Confucian model of what I have called a "human becoming," one's personal realization is irreducibly "other-entailing" and all relations are inclusively familial. Friends too become family. The flourishing of one's person and the thriving of one's family and community are isomorphic and co-terminus. We might bring this distinction between the "human being" and the "human becoming" into clearer focus by reflecting on Aristotle's understanding of the human being. The extent to which the contrasting understandings of person constitute a fundamental disjunction between Aristotle and Confucius is not lost on the comparative philosopher, May Sim:

Confucius appeals to no entity that we call the "self" (in several meanings of that term), much less a metaphysical *psyché*... When Aristotle asks about human well-being, he quickly turns to questions about human *being*. The focus and source of this being is the *psyché*—even more precisely the rational "part" of the *psyché* that marks what is distinctive to humankind. The well-functioning of this part of ourselves is the best thing in us and most to be prized, Aristotle argues. Although it is formally identical in every member of the species and thus what underwrites our talk of shared human nature and common basic virtues (and according to later Aristotelians, the moral equality of persons), an actual *psyché* is always *this-psyché* and hence individual.⁸²

In what follows I will contend that the classical Confucian texts, taken on their own terms rather than on Aristotle's, appeal to a relatively straightforward account of our actual life experience rather than to abstract entities, and in so doing, provide a justification for reinstating the intimacy of family feeling as the concrete ground of an always-emergent moral order. I will further argue that there is a difference between Western ethical theories that are directed at enabling people to think and to talk about ethics more cogently, and a Confucian vision of a consummate life that seeks to inspire people to be better persons.

Following Henry Rosemont in referring to this Confucian vision as a *role ethics*, we do not intend to advance it as an alternative moral *theory* so much as a vision of human flourishing, one that integrates the social, political, economic, aesthetic, moral *and* the *religious* dimensions of our lives. In this view, we are not individuals in the discrete sense of an Aristotelian *psyche*, but rather are interrelated persons living a multiplicity of roles that constitute who we are, and that allow us to pursue a unique distinctiveness and virtuosity in our conduct. We are, in other words, the sum of the roles we live in consonance with our fellows.

From the Confucian perspective of the relational human *becoming*, we are inclined to make the same miscalculation in thinking about ethical principles and virtues as we do in thinking about human nature as the ground of "being" human. Principles, virtues, and human nature too are all abstractions from concrete instances of continuing conduct. With human nature, as with principles and virtue, we are inclined to default to a retrospective causal or a teleological explanation rather than provide a more holistic, prospective, contextual, and processive account of what it means to *become* human—a *human becoming*, as it were. In so doing, we come to presuppose that human nature is either a given potential to be actualized or some pre-existing ideal to be attained. It is believed by some scholars that free agency and moral responsibility require the isolation of individuals from their relationships by positing such a definition of what it *is* to be human, a ready-made definition of human *being* or a guiding teleological hand that in fact truncates any robust existential notion of agency or responsibility.⁸³

Negative freedom as the absence of constraint is not, in and of itself, productive. As Dewey observes: "No man and no mind was ever emancipated by being left alone."⁸⁴ In the Confucian tradition, real freedom is concrete: It is the opportunity to realize oneself fully within the roles and relations that constitute one first in the family, and then by extension within the world more broadly construed. Freedom is maximizing personal growth as it is determined by full participation in and enjoyment of one's family and community relations.

Similarly, equality, rather than being quantitative and entailing some essential shared identity, is an equitable getting and giving. It is having available to one's person everything that is needed to pursue one's own unique trajectory as an increasingly consummate person through the

various phases of one's life, and in the process, making full return on this investment by enhancing the worth of the family and community. Such equality allows for the optimizing of resources in the successive stages of beneficiary, benefactor, and again beneficiary in the living of the many roles that make up the process of a normal human life. For always-unique persons, such equality means having all the assets necessary to accomplish what in the fullness of time will allow them to become their own best thoughts.

And the notion of justice—rather than being an appeal to abstract principles to enforce a blind impartiality that requires all particular differences to be set aside and all persons be treated equally—references the complex, creative process of achieving what is most appropriate in the specific, usually inequitable relations and situations that locate us within family and community. The resolutely hierarchical and dynamic pattern of the human experience that begins in family relations is going to have to be included in the equation that expresses a Confucian notion of justice. Such a Confucian understanding of freedom, equality, and justice, without deploying such terms specifically, is nested in the concrete project of achieving consummate conduct (*ren*) by being optimally appropriate (*yi*) in one's proper roles and relations (*li*).

We might rehearse an anecdote from the later Confucian text, the *Xunzi* 荀子, that gives us a starting point for clarifying the enormous difference between the unilateral integrity of *psyche*-invested, discrete "human beings" who aspire to a self-sufficient autonomy, and the multilateral integrity of "human becoming" as they are embedded in and emerge from the "big family." Indeed, integrity for the "human becoming" is not "being resolutely who you already are," but is rather a continuing process of "becoming one together."

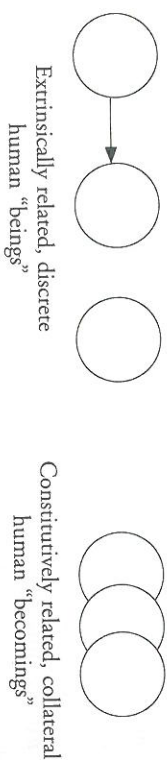
It is because Confucius himself introduces and develops the neologism, "consummate person or conduct" (*ren* 仁), as a key philosophical idea that his students ask him repeatedly to clarify what he means by this term. And he in turn provides each of them with an explanation—indeed, as we have seen, an explanation that is tailored to the different needs of different students. One day, recounts the *Xunzi*, the Master is holding court with his protégés, and quizzes each of them to evaluate their current understanding of his new term, *ren*.

The first, a passionate but less-capable student, Zilu, demonstrates

some degree of insight in his response. He insists that *ren* means raising the self-esteem of others by making them feel good about themselves—that is, “causing others to love themselves” (*shiren aiji* 使人愛己). Indeed such persons, says Confucius, have achieved a degree of refinement, and might be called scholar-officials (*shi* 士). His more imaginative student, Zigong, in replying to Confucius’s question about the meaning of *ren*, reverses the direction and asserts that *ren* is a kind of altruism—“loving others” (*airen* 愛人). Confucius allows that such persons in loving others have indeed attained a higher degree of refinement, and might be called not only scholar-officials but also exemplary in their persons (*shijunzi* 士君子).

Then Confucius’s favorite student, Yan Hui steps up to take his turn, stating flatly that *ren* means “self-loving” (*zizi* 自愛). Confucius is delighted with what he takes to be a most concise and penetrating understanding of *ren*, describing such a self-regarding person as being a truly enlightened, exemplary person (*mingjunzi* 明君子).⁸⁵

Of course, among discrete “human beings,” it would be hard to see how “self-loving” would lead to consummatory conduct. Indeed, *ren* so defined might be misconstrued as a self-regarding narcissism that would hardly lead to excellence in one’s relations. The difference that makes a difference for the “human becoming” lies in an alternative understanding of “self” as an evolving configuration of relationships. Yan Hui’s point in this passage is that given the collaterality of the “human becoming,” “self-loving” is neither the self-directed egoism assumed when one encourages others to love themselves nor the other-directed altruism of loving other people. Indeed, for the person comprised of intrinsic rather than extrinsic relations in constitutive rather than contingent roles, such a self-regarding love with its embedded sense of “we” is bi-directional; it is at once reflexive and inclusive.



That is, “self-loving” would mean to cherish those specific roles and relationships that I am committed to nourishing as the very source

and substance of my own personal realization—it is loving me in my relationship with my spouse, my children, my students, my colleagues, and so on.

This use of a reflexive binomial such as “self-loving” (*zizi* 自愛) found in this passage from the *Xunzi* that defines one within one’s relationships is quite common in the early Confucian texts. Indeed, Herbert Fingarette suggests that, in translating the Confucian philosophical literature that includes terms such as *zixing* 自修, we do better to use the reflexive prefix form of “self” as in “self-examining” or the postfix “-self” as in “examining myself” as a deliberate strategy for avoiding the entification of a substantial, superordinate self. That is, he would have us avoid altogether the independent noun “self” as in “examining the self.”⁸⁶ I quote Fingarette at some length here:

Why should we reify “self” by giving it the independent noun form in English, and thus impure to Confucius the notion of some inner entity, some core of one’s being—whether egoistic or ideal.... [W]e ought to make it a point to avoid speaking of “the self” in Confucius. We ought to speak of a person as acting, but not suggesting by “person” this notion of an Actor who somehow embraces inwardly a moral or psychic core which is then expressed in action. On the contrary, the fundamental moral-human reality is ... the social nexus, and persons along with many other things received their specific, humanly relevant nature, as well as their humanly relevant location, by reference to and as a result of the communal life-forms. “Person” is an abstraction, a set of complex attributes conceptually abstracted from the social reality; social reality on the other hand is not an abstraction but is the concrete reality.⁸⁷

This claim by Fingarette has been frequently misunderstood. He is not denying a vital subjective dimension to the human experience, but is rather insisting that such a subjective aspect is never independent of our communal life-forms, our social reality. Said another way, he is unwilling to abstract and reify the Confucian notion of person and locate it outside of the wholeness of the personal experience itself that is lived through the roles and relations with others as constituting our concrete social reality.

"Human Becomings" as *Creatio in Situ*

When Hellmut Wilhelm observes that "the division of the creative process into two aspects is an idea frequently found in early Chinese writings," he is remarking upon this relational and contextual nature of the personal, social and cosmic reality that makes all creativity a matter of "co-creativity."⁸⁸ Wilhelm's insight is borne out by the description that is offered repeatedly in the *Analects* of how we create ourselves as persons by modeling ourselves on others:

Consummate persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves, and promote others in seeking to get there themselves.⁸⁹

When Confucius says that consummate persons promote both themselves and others in what they do, he means that they accrue dividends of significance from their meaningful relationships that enhance the worth of both themselves and others as persons. Using Fingarette's language, their persons are situated in and constitute a configuration of relations within the social reality, and any notion of a discrete and independent "self" is an abstraction from and in fact a distortion of this same reality. Thick and robust relations are a source of growth in the world, enriching the family, the community, and the cosmos. It is thus that in the vocabulary of personal realization in Confucian philosophy, the negative example of "the morally deficient person" (*xiaoren* 小人)—literally "a small, petty, or mean person"—is contrasted with those who are characterized in a language of personal growth and extension: "personal excellence" (*de* 德), for example, is defined paronomastically as "getting" (*de* 得), "spirituality" (*shen* 神) is a "stretching and extending" (*shen* 伸), "becoming exemplary" (*jün* 君) is a "gathering in of others" (*jün* 群), "becoming human" (*ren* 人) is a "becoming relationally virtuous" (*ren* 仁), and so on. Indeed, the cosmos grows bigger and better because contemporary encounters with Confucius continue to produce meaningful people.

A reflection on the Confucian notion *cheng* 誠—conventionally rendered "sincerely," "honestly," or "with integrity"—is revealing of this sense of relational growth. First, etymologically the character *cheng* is comprised of "completing" (*cheng* 成) and "discoursing" (*yan* 言)—

suggesting an accomplishment achieved through the various modalities of communicating effectively with one another. Beginning with the *Shuowen* 說文 as the earliest lexicon, in the traditional dictionaries *cheng* 誠 and *xin* 信 as "living up to one's word" are most frequently glossed by appeal to each other. *Xin* 信 denotes the situational rather than agency-centered combination of perceived "credibility" and the concomitant "trust" that such credibility inspires; it describes a situation in which its participants conduct themselves sincerely and honestly with mutual regard. The cultivation of these honest relationships entails integrity not only in the sense of the persistent particularity of persons, but also in the integrative sense of becoming one together in their concrete, social relationships. And the spontaneous emergence of significance in these relationships is the very meaning of this collaborative personal creativity. Indeed, the prefix "co-" is made redundant by the fact that it is *only* this kind of situated co-creativity—at once cognitive and affective, aesthetic and intensely religious—that can legitimately be called "creativity." Or stated negatively, *creatio ex nihilo* as creativity without context is incoherent because there is nothing that does anything in isolation and by itself.

Again, "self-loving" (*zizai* 自愛) gives primacy to immediate feelings, suggesting as it does that the dominant site of personal growth lies in the exercise of the thinking and feeling that we associate with the "heartmind" (*xin* 心). The activities of the mind cannot be divorced from the feelings of the heart; the cognitive is inseparable from the affective. There are no rational thoughts devoid of feeling, nor any raw feelings lacking cognitive content. As we observed in chapter two above, in the classical Chinese worldview in which process and change have priority over form and stasis, it is frequently observed that, in TCM, physiology has priority over anatomy, and function takes precedence over site. This being the case, it might well be argued that *xin* means "thinking and feeling" first, and then derivatively and metaphorically, the specific organ with which these experiences are to be associated. *Xin* is only metaphorically an organ because it is in fact an unbounded center or focus of activity. And the site of realizing a trusting relationship with each other is the reservoir of thoughtful feelings that fill our hearts and minds. This is only to say that the creative personal transactions—the doings and undergoings among persons that disclose

their feelings for one another—are the source and the substance of meaningful relations.

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

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: *Xing* denotes the continuing life and function of a particular thing itself, and also refers to that whereby a thing continues and contributes to the life of other things. The “nature” of the earth, for example, lies not only in its own conditions—something that has various mineral properties or something that is stable and firm. The “nature” of earth also lies in its propensity to grow and give life to other things—the way in which earth provides sustenance for plants and by extension, animals, and the way in which it provides a foundation on which suitable human habitation can be built.⁹⁰ Analogously, Confucian persons are defined relationally and collaterally—not only by what they “are,” but more importantly, by what they “do” with and for other persons and things in the world.

In the concluding portion of chapter two, we rehearsed a series of propositions that Tang Junyi offers as generalizations that are defining of a persistent yet always changing Chinese natural cosmology. These propositions proffered by Tang Junyi have provided us with an alternative vocabulary for reiterating and reinforcing the characterization of Chinese cosmology we were able to abstract from the *Great Tradition* 大傳 commentary on the *Book of Changes* 易經. Tang in one final proposition invokes yet another feature of Chinese cosmology that provides insight into the vectoral yet always contingent nature of the human experience. For Tang Junyi, as a Confucian, “nature” (*xing*) 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 tian dao guan* 性即天道觀).⁹¹ He further clarifies what he means by this proposition:

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.⁹²

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 a creative advance in the continuing present of any situation. “Human nature,” then, is a generalization regarding the aggregating, purposeful yet open-ended disposition of human beings over time, and is nothing more or less than an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuousity (*ren* 仁) within our inherited natural and cultural legacy (*tian dao* 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. In fact, rather than referencing some fixed endowment, for Tang it is precisely the indeterminate possibility for deliberate, 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.

To illustrate this notion of contingent emergence, Tang provides a gloss on the opening passage of the *Zhongyong*. In his commentary on this text, Tang seeks to preclude any theistic interpretation of *tian* 天 (conventionally translated “Heaven”) and any essentialistic interpretation of human nature. In explanation of the phrase “what *tian* 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.⁹³

Tang then goes on to identify what he takes to be distinctively human, where it is the degree of self-conscious freedom and creativity that distinguishes humans from other things:

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 toward 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 who can do it.⁹⁴

It is in this sense that the *Book of Rites* can claim that "humans are the heartmind of the world."⁹⁵ 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.

In Tang Junyi's extensive work on "human nature" (*renxing*), he demonstrates a great sensitivity to the existential coloring of the classical Confucian conception of what it means to become human. 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."⁹⁶ It is only in that existing things have life, growth, and purpose that they have *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 existential 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 then 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.⁹⁷

Tang thus emphasizes the primacy of the actual existential realization of human aspirations as they emerge in an ever-changing context over the conceptualization and articulation of these pursuits, giving full notice to the personal locus of that realization. He dissociates 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 possibilities for inspired, creative change that Tang identifies as the most significant 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 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.⁹⁸

What is an initial condition in the nature of human beings is most importantly the propensity for purposeful growth, cultivation, and refinement—a human capacity for radical changeability. Thus throughout Tang's analysis, and especially in reference to the human phenomenon, he underscores the fundamental relationality and collaterality 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 the 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.⁹⁹

If we were to summarize the notion of "human becoming" that follows from Tang Junyi's description of "human nature" (*renxing*), 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 notion of person is vital and inherently active, and is not only responsive to its environments, but is further characterized by the freedom of purpose and the creativity to be self-defining and self-aware. This reflexive, gerundive "self" has to be understood as irreducibly transactional: shaping and being shaped in its contextualizing relations. This process of person-making is first and foremost a striving and a "doing" that expresses its life and growth, and that in the production of enhanced meaning, brings with it aspiration, frustration, and hopefully sometimes, satisfaction. Such an understanding of person 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 bounded unity. This process of becoming a person is always embodied and embodying as a porous membrane that strives to achieve meaning and coherence in the changing configuration of its relations. It is hylozoistic—that is, at once psychic and physical. It offers a

revisionist and emergent understanding of person 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. Against the background of its *creatio in situ* cosmology, becoming a person is the creative and always-unique process of aggregating and integrating relations in the world over the span of a human narrative. Indeed this understanding of person in the Confucian terms of art is an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuosity (*ren* 仁) within our inherited cultural legacy (*tiantao* 天道), allowing Tang to insist that "human nature is nothing but the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves" (*xing ji tiantao guan* 性即天道觀). 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 consummate life to the spirituality we associate with an increasingly religious sensitivity. This notion of human becoming breathes life into the Confucian vocabulary, transforming terms such as "excellence" (*de* 德) into striving after and "realizing oneself" (*zide* 自得) and "appropriateness" (*yi* 義) into a self-conscious sense of responsibility and accountability in one's relations with others.

I want to argue further that, with respect to this notion of human nature, Tang Junyi's "New Confucianism" is not so new. Indeed, this collateral and multilateral understanding of person-making is in fact consistent with the Confucianism espoused in the *Great Learning* that sets the Confucian project. And I have described this Confucian project 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 to sagehood seeks ultimately 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 family and communal relations, learn to do the most ordinary of things in the most extraordinary of ways. As it states in the *Zhongyong*:

The vision of the consummate life (*dao*) is not at all remote. If someone considers this consummate life to be something that is distant and inaccessible, they have taken a wrong turn.¹⁰⁰

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."¹⁰¹

The Confucian claim that "everyone can become a sage" is often 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 shape the world in some incomparable way. Some interpreters in searching for democratic elements in classical Confucianism have latched on to this claim as a ground for an ostensive egalitarianism. We have seen that Tang's processual and provisional understanding of "human nature" precludes the possibility of such a familiar, default interpretation. 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 in so doing are sages. And given our initial conditions and our cultural resources, all of us have the opportunity to live such significant lives. The potential for sagehood lies not *within* individuals exclusive of their worlds, but through a process of transformation that includes their worlds in the fullest sense. When sages do appear, they have emerged *pari passu* from their radically situated, collaborative, and transactional careers as human beings.

Our Uncommon Assumptions

The *Mencius* has been definitive in the articulation of a distinctively Confucian conception of what it means to become a consummate

person. And Tang Junyi has provided us with a nuanced and unfamiliar understanding of "human nature" that requires us to look again at the prevailing interpretations of what in the *Mencius* has been conventionally translated as "human nature" (*renxing*). We should begin our investigation of Mencius by first registering the unadvertised presuppositions that we might inadvertently bring to this text in our best attempts to interpret it. Michael Sandel, in his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, reflects on the variety of names we use to express our self-understanding, one of them being "human nature." He observes that:

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.¹⁰²

John Stuart Mill is a fair example of such an assumption, insisting as he does that all social activity can be traced back to a fixed an invariant human nature:

The laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state. Men, however, in a state of society are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature.¹⁰³

The familiar vocabulary of our liberal self-understanding—individualism, autonomy, equality, and freedom—often entails the humanistic assumption that the liberating of ready-made and omniscient individuals from numbing political strictures to pursue their own self-interest will guarantee a functional democracy. Freedom from constraint will allow unencumbered individuals, if left alone in their untrammelled state of nature, to "manifest" themselves as full-blown participants in a healthy political life. The language of spontaneity, originality, and genius belongs to the belief that an unconstricted humanity has the inborn assets to flower of its own accord.

These assumptions have a long history. As the sometimes reluctant heirs to metaphysical realism as our shared common sense, we find that sedimented into our language is the unannounced and unremarkable notion of repeatable universals subsisting in particular things that individuate things as individual "members" of a kind. And our logic of knowing has been to identify and grasp the intelligible universal as it is

instantiated in the particular, and thus to be able to call the objects of knowledge by their own name: individually, specifically, and generically. While we seldom perform such an analysis self-consciously, we certainly entertain such assumptions as a matter of course in the way in which we operate in our ordinary experience. It is this long-established habit of thought that makes the quantitative "individuality" of human beings obvious and commonsensical.¹⁰⁴

Persistent and powerful philosophical ideas promoted largely by classical liberal Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Locke, and Mill have become the common currency of political philosophy, and have influenced the way in which many sinologists, Chinese as well as Western, have come to their interpretation of the Mencian notion of *renxing*.

The Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子) and "Human Becomings"

Broadly speaking, in the current literature Mencius has come to be widely understood as forwarding an *a priori* conception of an abstract, innate, essential human nature, a given, inborn potential that is then actualized in the life experience.¹⁰⁵ As the interpretation in this literature stands, Mencius offers a clear explanation of what we are as "human beings."

What is at issue here in saving Mencius from essentialism is the question: How do we define what it means to be human?—by a speculative and reductive assumption about innate, isolatable causes that locate persons outside of their roles and relations, or alternatively, by taking account of the initial conditions and context of persons, and then by assaying the full aggregation of consequent action? How do we explain growth?—by reduplicative causal accounts (the child is a ready-made adult), by teleological accounts (the child is simply preliminary to the actualization of the existing ideal), or by a contextual, narrative account available to us through a phenomenology of personal action? We must ask whether the metaphysical way of thinking about "human beings" is consistent with the Confucian project of becoming consummately human within a natural correlative cosmology, a project that seems to demand not only motivation and real effort, but also imagination and a creative responsiveness to ever changing

circumstances. If, as it is so often assumed, Mencius is proffering a superordinate and substantial conception of human nature, how do we square this assumption with his own minimalist claim that initially "what distinguishes people from the brutes is infinitesimal?"¹⁰⁶ And again, why would he use the minimalist metaphorical language of *duan* 端—the first inkings or signs, the tips, the sprouts—if he is indeed describing a substantial facticity?¹⁰⁷

To make the case for a processual understanding of "human nature" (*renxing*), we might take one of these "beginnings" as an example: "achieved propriety in our roles and relationships" (*li*). On the side of the infant, born within the context of its familial life forms, there is certainly a predisposition and a propensity to develop over time into a responsive and thus responsible member of this social unit. But a distorting limitation in our thinking arises when we locate the discussion of *renxing* exclusively within the abstracted individual infant rather than within the inclusive and concrete web of family relations. Regardless of how we describe a human nativity and its initial responsiveness to the institutions and structures of communal living, it is the family as the articulated social and cultural locus of otherwise inchoate persons—an invested and meaningful concentration of beliefs, skills, interests, values, occupations, and so on—that is the predominant creative source out of which persons grow, and to which grown persons ultimately contribute their particular meanings.

Infants have a predisposition to communicate, but it is the world of cultural meanings into which they are born that provide them with the communicative resources necessary to participate effectively in their specific families and communities. If there is proof needed that the weight of "human nature" as defining of what it means to become distinctively human lies in the concrete social situation of which the individual is a part, rather than exclusively in inchoate individuals themselves, we have simply to reference the staggering diversity of ways of thinking and living within the vastly disparate human cultures. On the other hand, proof that the initial conditions are not the substance of what it means to become human might be the phenomenon of remarkably similar feral children who seem to be the ineluctable consequence of disconnected and dislocated "human beings" living out their animality without the resource of family life.

Indeed, I will argue in what follows that the *Mencius* is positing the notion of a relationally constituted "human becoming," a notion of person that requires an understanding fundamentally different from any retrospective, essentialistic conception of the human being. I am further persuaded that the recently recovered Confucian document, *Five Modes of Proper Conduct* (*Wuxingpian* 五行篇), resonates in many ways with the *Mencius* and corroborates this interpretation of the Mencian *renxing* as a prospective, processual, transactional, and radically contextual understanding of what it means to become human.

As I have argued elsewhere, a first step in understanding *renxing* 人性 in the *Mencius* is to distinguish it clearly from a second notion that also has an important role in the cluster of terms through which Mencius explicates the project of personal cultivation, that is, the "heartmind" (*xin* 心).¹⁰⁸ There has been a decided tendency on the part of scholars in interpreting Mencius to elide *xing* and *xin* without respecting their important differences. This confusion emerges because the *xing* as a creative process is rooted in the heartmind (*xin*), and human beings in general do have certain determinative propensities as a function of their initial natural conditions. But it is precisely over and against these determinate propensities that we are able to observe the creative process of change, growth, and refinement that constitutes *xing*.

We are told explicitly in the *Mencius* that persons all have heartminds (*xin*), and that these heartminds share a given incipient propensity for moral conduct that is metaphorically described as "the four inkings" (*sidaan* 四端):

The heartmind in feeling pity at suffering has the first inking of consummate conduct; the heartmind in feeling shame at crudeness has the first inking of appropriate conduct; the heartmind in feeling a sense of modesty and deference has the first inking of propriety in conduct; the heartmind in feeling a sense of approval and disapproval has the first inking of wise conduct. Persons having these four inkings (*sidaan*) is like their having four limbs.... Now acknowledging these four inkings in me, the process of realizing the development and fruition of them all is like a fire beginning to burn or a spring of water beginning to break through. Persons who are able to bring them fully to fruition can sustain all within the four seas; persons unable to do so cannot even serve their own parents.¹⁰⁹

This passage describes the initial conditions of the heartmind, but we have to remember that the graph for *xing* 性 is comprised of both "heartmind" (*xin*) and "to be born, to grow, to live" (*sheng* 生). Taking this verbal "growth" (*sheng* 生) complement to heartmind as an important further consideration, in the *Mencius* we are again told explicitly that:

Consummatory conduct (*ren*), a sense of appropriateness (*yi*), an achieved propriety in roles and relations (*li*), and a capacity to live wisely (*zhi*) that exemplary persons engender and grow (*xing*) as their habits of conduct is rooted in their heartminds, and grows in their countenance. The luster of this conduct is manifest in their faces, is discernible in their posture, and extends throughout their bodies. They do not need to explain what they are doing to be understood by others.¹¹⁰

If we couple this passage with the analogical claim in the 2A6 passage cited above that "persons having these four inkings (*sidaan*) is like their having four limbs," we can appreciate that the four inkings and the body are both incipient sites of growth.¹¹¹ Indeed, it is only through this assiduous process of cultivation that the *xing* can be fully developed:

Those who exhaust their heartminds (*xin*) realize their *xing*, and to realize their *xing* is to realize *tian*. Preserving their *xin* and nurturing their *xing* is the way to serve *tian*.¹¹²

As one example of this problem of conflating *xin* and *xing*, Zhang Dainian suggests that "since the sage is also a man, the *xing* that the sage has is the *xing* that all people have."¹¹³ On a careful reading of the *Mencius*, Zhang could certainly assert that the sage has a *xin* that is similar to that of all people. In fact, the *Mencius* describes the *xin* as an organ (*guan* 官) on a plane with the organs of sight and hearing.¹¹⁴ But Zhang's assumption would seem to be that *xing* like *xin* is a given potential shared by all, and the sage is simply the one who successfully actualizes it. However, as Tang Junyi has argued, the possibility of *xing* does not lie within *xing* itself; *xing* is a creative collaboration between something and its various environments. Being a person does not make one a sage; becoming a sage makes one most fully a person. There is an important difference between saying that everyone has the nature of a sage and saying that everyone who conducts themselves as a sage

is a sage. The potential for becoming a sage emerges *pari passu* in the transactional events that constitute the substance of a human life. Mencius makes this point explicitly:

Cao Jiao inquired: "Is it the case that we can all become Yaos and Shuns?"

Mencius replied: "... The way of Yao and Shun is nothing but family reverence and fraternal deference. If you wear Yao's clothes, speak his words, and do what he does, then you *are* a Yao."¹¹⁵

The passage that is generally cited from the *Mencius* as defining of his understanding that human nature is essentially good (*xingshan* 性善) is the following:

As respects one's actual circumstances that one can act efficaciously is what is meant by *shan*. As respects one acting ineptly, this is not the fault of one's native ability. All people have a heart/mind that feels pity at suffering, that feels shame at crudeness, that feels a sense of modesty and deference, and that feels a sense of approval and disapproval. The feeling of pity at suffering leads to consummate conduct; the feeling of shame at crudeness leads to appropriate conduct; the feeling of a sense of modesty and deference leads to propriety in conduct; the feeling of sense of approval and disapproval leads to wisdom in conduct. These four inklings in conduct do not illuminate me from without. They are tendencies that I have but have simply failed to acknowledge. It is for this reason that it is said: "If you seek it you will get it; if you don't you will lose it." That some people are twice, five times, and indeed infinitely better than others is because there are those who fail to make the most of their native ability.¹¹⁶

I would argue that the basic misreading of this passage arises from interpreting the distinction between inside and outside as exclusive and essential rather than as correlative, experiential, and a function of circumstances. It is the same misreading that is possible when Yan Hui's definition of *ren* as "self-loving" (*zizi* 自愛) is understood to be exclusive of others rather than relational. The point is that these inclinations in conduct locate relationally constituted persons within experience in which their subjective dispositions as well as their objective behavior must both be acknowledged. Moral conduct is a collaboration between persons and their worlds rather than being a pattern of behavior derived solely from the outside, or solely from the inside.

Perhaps the key to understanding this passage is defining efficacy (*shan*) as something we are inclined to do rather than something that we essentially are: *keyi weishanyì* 可以為善矣 ("one can act/become/do *shan*"). This active understanding of *shan* suggests that efficacy is a quality of activity that one is disposed to achieve by virtue of one's situation, rather than as the expression of some innate quality of character irrespective of one's circumstances.¹¹⁷

That efficacy (*shan*) is an inclination that must be developed and brought to fruition is made clear in a more careful reading of another frequently cited passage that D. C. Lau has translated as:

It is certainly the case ... that water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and low? Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.¹¹⁸

The problem with this translation is that in saying that "human nature is good, just as water seeks low ground," it fails to respect the symmetry of the sentence. Observing the parallel structure, we might translate it as:

Water certainly has no inclination to flow eastward as opposed to westward, but does the same hold true in its flowing downwards or upwards? Human *xing* seeks efficacy (*shan*) just as water seeks to flow downwards. There is no person who does not seek efficacy; there is no water that does not flow downwards.

Important here is that the text is saying that *xing* entails an inclination in personal growth in which one *seeks* to become *shan*, not that *xing* in itself "is" *shan*.

A second important consideration is the difference that human effort makes in the cultivation of one's native tendencies—native inclinations that if not acted upon can even be lost utterly. That some people become so much better than others speaks to the vital role that disciplined, habituated conduct has in growing what, after all, are only one's initial conditions. Mencius reiterates the point that the initial conditions can only become productive if they are actively engaged, and that it is this deliberate conduct itself that makes all the difference—indeed, a quantum difference—in the quality of one's person:

Gongduzi asked Mencius: "Since they are equally human, how is it that some persons become exemplary while others are wholly deficient?"

"Those who follow their superior parts (*dà* 大體) become superior; those who follow their inferior parts (*xiǎo* 小體) become inferior," replied Mencius.

"Since they are equally human, how is it that some would follow their superior parts while others would follow their inferior parts?" he asked.

"Our physical senses such as sight and hearing are not reflective, and can be deceived by external things. When one thing is engaged by another, it is simply distracted by it. The function of the heart/mind on the other hand is thinking, but it will only accomplish something if it actually thinks. We have been given this as our native ability. If one begins by attending to the superior parts, the inferior parts will not be able to take their place. This is how one becomes a superior person."¹¹⁹

The *Mencius* allows that certain tendencies are native to us by virtue of our initial circumstances. Mencius however wants to reserve the category of *xing* to include only those among such tendencies that when fully cultivated make us distinctively human. While we have bodily senses such as taste, sight, hearing, and smell—a physical sensorium, as it were—these senses are not exclusively human, and so Mencius chooses to call them basic conditions (*ming* 命) rather than natural tendencies (*xing*):

The mouth's propensity for tastes, the eye's for colors, the ear's for sounds, the nose's for smells, and the four limbs' for comfort—these are native tendencies (*xing*), and yet because basic conditions (*ming*) also have a role in these capacities, exemplary persons are not given to referring to them as *xing*. A propensity for consummate conduct in the father-son relation, for appropriateness in the ruler-subject relation, for ritual propriety in the guest-host relation, for wisdom on the part of superior persons, and to have sages for the way of *tian*, are basic conditions (*ming*), yet because *xing* also has a role in these capacities, exemplary persons are not given to referring to them as basic conditions.¹²⁰

We as persons are born into a manifold of family and community roles and relations, and by virtue of these thick initial conditions, we have feelings of pity at suffering, feelings of modesty and deference, a sense

of propriety and a sense of approval and disapproval—indeed, an ethical sensorium. The ethical sensorium is rooted in the heart/mind (*xin* 心) as a generalization of the conditions which obtain when a person is born, and it is this sensorium that is then articulated across the particular narrative of a distinctively human life as a collaboration between person and world to become one's *xing* 性. Mencius says that:

Context alters one's vital energies just as what one eats alters one's body. Huge indeed is the function of context. Would we not otherwise just be anybody's son?¹²¹

It is in this sense that we might claim that relatively speaking, persons are less importantly similar and more importantly distinctive and unique cultural achievements, and that what it means to become human is a generalization made from the collective history of our narratives and our accomplishments. It is for this reason that Mencius claims "the various doctrines on *xing* that have been discussed in the world are all nothing but a matter of invoking historical precedents."¹²²

The Five Modes of Proper Conduct (*Wuxingpian* 五行篇)¹²³ as a Window on the *Mencius*

I will use the *Wuxingpian* document recently recovered in archaeological finds first at Mawangdui near Changsha in Hunan province (1973) and then more recently at Guodian near Jingmen in Hubei (1993) to affirm that the Mencian "four inkings" (*sìduan* 四端) are certainly the initial conditions for becoming human, and to agree that in this sense they are native. Yet at the same time I will use this same text to argue that these "four inkings," like the first four modes of proper conduct (*sìxing* 四行) described in the *Wuxingpian*, are informed by the primarily acquired conditions of radically contextualized, relational, and emergent persons where most of the active force and meaning of this conduct in the first years of life derives not from the "person" exclusive of family relations, but on the contrary, from the already matured family-side of one's collateral roles and relationships. I will thus be arguing for a genealogical and historical understanding of the Mencian notion of human inclinations rather than for one based upon metaphysical speculation.

By collateral roles and relationships that define persons, I mean that generally speaking there are no children without mothers, no brothers without siblings, and certainly no viable babies born without a family circle that, in loving them, enables them to survive and to thrive. Indeed, the acquired habits of the family are primary in preserving and educating the life of the infant, and the native conditions of the infant are secondary as largely dependent upon the stimulation and interpretation of the family. The "four inkings" of *wuxing* are anchored deeply in family relations, and initially the growth in meaning and value of these relationships derives largely from family intimates as their immediate source. It is such relations that are the entry point for humans to develop and to become distinctive as individuals, and in the fullness of time, to become distinctively human.

The always-unique persons in this collateral sense—this daughter to this mother—do not "have" relationships, or "come into" relationships, but rather are constituted as irreducibly relational by those bonds that locate them as foci within the field of the big family. They begin as "we" rather than "I." As Mencius claims, "all things are here in me," and most immediately and importantly among all things are one's family relations.¹²⁴ Indeed, any putative "individuality" must be understood as either an abstraction from these concrete, native, and primarily acquired conditions, or an achieved distinctiveness cultivated in one's relations with others that makes one an identifiable object of deference.¹²⁵ Similarly, any notion of "family" is an abstraction from these specific, particular persons who collectively and organically constitute a human nexus. Both particular persons and particular families are concrete configurations of particular relationships, and stand in a dynamic focus-field relationship with one another.

From its content we might surmise that the document entitled *Wuxingpian* preceded the *Mencius* chronologically, and has identifiable resonances with the *Mencius* that might bespeak of some influence, direct or otherwise, upon the content of this later text.¹²⁶ *Wuxingpian* describes how "five modes of proper conduct" (*wuxing* 五行)—that is, "conducting oneself consummately" (*ren* 仁), "acting with optimal appropriateness" (*yi* 義), "achieving propriety in one's roles and relations" (*li* 禮), "acting wisely" (*zhi* 知), and "behaving sagaciously" (*sheng* 聖)—aggregate over time to become a unified excellence that informs future action. These

are five acquired habits that need to be cultivated for interacting most productively in family and community. Importantly, there is an explicit connection between both the specific order and the substance of these "five modes of proper conduct" and the Mencian notion of the "four inkings" (*sidaan*) as the positive initial conditions of the human heartmind (*xin* 心) that prompt and inform our growth (*xing* 性) to emerge as fully moral humans.¹²⁷ How do we put these two lists of desired conduct together?

A major contribution of the *Wuxingpian* from its opening paragraph lies in pressing the idea that it is compounding proper conduct itself that is the primary source and substance of our moral habits. In large measure, we become what we do. Mencius's conception of "natural tendencies" (*wenxing*) likewise is best understood as a process of moral growth that begins with initial conditions within the context of family, and results in a dynamic pattern of always-contextualized and evolving moral habits. That is, *this* family is the point of entry and initial source that makes the cultivation of *this* distinguished person possible, and it is the emergence of *this* distinguished person that in turn enhances the meaning of *this* family.

The *Wuxingpian*'s description of the "five modes of proper conduct" as "moral excellences" (*de* 德) rather than as the "four inkings" (*sidaan*) of our "natural tendencies" (*xing* 性) is significant in this argument. As the *Wuxingpian* explains from the opening passage, the five moral excellences (*de* 德) are something acquired (*de* 得) and harmonized (*he* 和) through an ongoing process of habituation:

Consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁) taking shape within is called acting upon excellent habits (*de* 德); where it does not take shape within, it is called merely doing what is deemed consummate. Appropriate acting (*yi* 義) taking shape within is called acting upon excellent habits (*de*); where it does not take shape within, it is called merely doing what is deemed appropriate. A sense of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) taking shape within is called acting upon excellent habits (*de*); where it does not take shape within, it is called merely doing what is deemed proper.¹²⁸ Acting wisely (*zhi* 智) taking shape within is called acting on excellent habits (*de*); where it does not take shape within, it is called merely doing what is deemed wise. Acting in a sagely way (*sheng* 聖) taking shape within is called acting upon excellent habits (*de*); where it does not take shape within, it is called merely doing what is deemed sagacious.¹²⁹

When harmony (*he*) is achieved among these five modes of proper conduct, it is called moral excellence (*de*). Achieving harmony among the first four of these modes of proper conduct is called efficacy (*shan* 善). Efficacy is the human way (*rendao* 人道); moral excellence is the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道).¹³⁰

This first passage of the *Wuxingpian*, with its emphasis on the nurturing of our moral excellences, might be associated with a similar distinction between the habituation of moral excellence in conduct and mere conduct that is made in *Mencius* 4B19:

Mencius said, "What distinguishes people from the brutes is ever so slight, and where the common run of people are apt to lose this quality, exemplary persons dwell on it and preserve it. Shun was wise to the way of all things and had real insight into human roles and relationships. He acted upon his moral habits to be consummatory and appropriate in his conduct rather than merely doing what is deemed consummatory and appropriate."¹³¹

The last two lines of this *Wuxingpian* passage that distinguish between the way of human beings and the way of *tian* further suggest a collaborative rather than an exclusive understanding of the relationship between *tian* and human beings. After all, this is not a theism wherein an independent creator deity unilaterally endows human beings with an essential nature. The *Analects* 7.23 passage observes: "*Tian* has given life to and nourished moral excellence in me,"¹³² a phrase that has its counterpart in *Mencius* 6A15 cited previously: "The function of the heart/mind on the other hand is thinking, but it will only accomplish something if it actually thinks. We have been given this as our native ability."¹³³ If in our interpretation of these passages we consider the symbiotic and interdependent relationship assumed to obtain between *tian* and *ren*—that is, between the natural and cultural context and the human—we might read it as saying that *tian* provides not only the initial conditions, but also a legacy and the context in which the project of personal cultivation can take place efficaciously (*shan* 善). But importantly, it is the human habituation of moral excellence (*de*) in conduct that extends and gives articulation to the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道). For *ren* 人 and *tian* 天, we know them collaterally by what they mean for each other as the ultimate source of aggregating

meaning and as the meaningful context that facilitates continuing human growth.

The Pragmatic Notion of Relational Person: An Associative and Contrastive Analogy

In the introductory chapter, I argued that analogy is not only crucial to cultural translation, but unavoidable. Further, I maintained that these selected correlations can serve understanding as either associative or contrastive analogies, and that in pursuing these connections, we need to think retail rather than wholesale. In thinking through and seeking to clarify the Confucian notion of the radically embedded, relationally constituted, and always-emergent person, we might take John Dewey's notion of "individuality" as a potentially productive example of an associative analogy. Indeed, Dewey's individuality can perhaps serve as both an associative and a contrastive analogy in bringing this Confucian version of relationally constituted person into clearer resolution. 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.¹³⁴

These pragmatists are revolutionary within the Western narrative in dispensing with the "old psychology" that begins from assumptions about a superordinate and discrete *psyche*. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey echoes many of the ideas proffered by Tang Junyi on "human nature" that were cited above, with both philosophers calling into question the separation of "human nature" and "conduct" by disputing the very distinction between them. Indeed, both Tang and Dewey shave with Ockham's razor by dispensing with the superordinate "person, soul,

self" and insisting that cultivated moral dispositions as habits of conduct are themselves the substance of what it means to become a consummate person. There is no need felt to appeal to some reduplicative notion of a discrete "agent" or "character" that would isolate and locate persons as a motive force outside of the pattern of their social and natural relations.

While Tang focuses on an always-situated and contextual meaning of *xing* in the transactional and collateral nature of human conduct, Dewey must struggle to overcome the default assumptions that have become entrenched within his own tradition:

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.¹³⁵

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

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.¹³⁶

Dewey further insists that, whatever we have as the initial conditions situating us within community, these conditions must be attended by a substantial process of nurturance and growth: "We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community."¹³⁷ For Dewey, "individuality" is not quantitative: it is neither a pre-social potential nor a kind of isolating discreteness. Rather, it is qualitative, arising through distinctive service to one's community. Individuality is "the realization of what we specifically are as distinct from others,"¹³⁸ a realization that can only take place within the context

of a flourishing communal life. "Individuality cannot be opposed to association," says Dewey. "It is through association that man has acquired his individuality, and it is through association that he exercises it."¹³⁹ An individual so construed is not a "thing" but a "patterned event," describable in the language of uniqueness, integrity, social activity, relationality, and qualitative achievement.

We might appeal to some Deweyan observations on habits of personal growth as an alternative vocabulary that provides us with an associative analogy for this Confucian relational, situational, and transactional notion of personal conduct. First, Dewey is critical of the hypostatization of conduct as a notion of a discrete agency that locates instincts within isolated individuals:

A combination of traditional individualism with the recent interest in progress explains why the discovery of the scope and force of instincts has led many psychologists to think of them as the fountain head of all conduct, as occupying a place before instead of after that of habits. The orthodox tradition in psychology is built upon isolation of individuals from their surroundings. The soul or mind or consciousness was thought of as self-contained and self-enclosed.¹⁴⁰

Dewey appeals to the actual situated human experience as we live it in rejecting the priority of an ostensive autonomous "self" over that of an organic configuration of relations, and in questioning the priority of instincts to shared cultural life forms. He argues that any infant isolated from its dependent relations would quickly become a dead infant; that is, infants left to their own devices without access to or intervention by culturally informed relations could not survive for a single day. Even the meaning of the actions and gestures of infants is derived from the mature communal context within which they reside:

The inchoate and scattered impulses of an infant do not coordinate into serviceable powers except through social dependencies and companionships. His impulses are merely starting points for assimilation of the knowledge and skill of the more matured beings upon whom he depends. They are tentacles sent out to gather that nutrition from customs which will in time render the infant capable of independent action. They are agencies for transfer of existing social power into personal ability; they are means of reconstructive growth.¹⁴¹

Dewey is, in his own tradition, a flat-out revolutionary in insisting upon the primacy of the relationally constituted, concrete situation as the garden of social intelligence and the locus for the pursuit of the consummate life. The optimally appropriate response to our ever-present uncertainties and any confident resolution of these uncertainties can only be negotiated within the actual circumstances themselves, with individual agency itself being an abstraction from them:

The primary significance of the unique and morally ultimate character of the concrete situation is to transfer the weight and burden of morality to intelligence. It does not destroy responsibility; it only locates it. A moral situation is one in which judgment and choice are required antecedently to overt action. The practical meaning of the situation ... the action needed to satisfy it—is not self-evident. It has to be searched for.¹⁴²

Dewey is radical in this social construction of the person. He certainly rejects the idea that the human being is in any way complete outside of the association one has with other people. Indeed, he would claim that "apart from the ties which bind him [the human being] to others, he is nothing."¹⁴³ As James Campbell observes, this passage is easily and often misunderstood as a negation of the individual.¹⁴⁴ But as we have seen with Dewey's notion of emergent "individuality," to say that persons are irreducibly social is not to deny the integrity, uniqueness, and diversity of human beings; on the contrary, it is precisely to affirm these conditions.

In commenting on Dewey and the social processes in which persons are created, Campbell avers Aristotle's vocabulary of "potential" and "actual":

Dewey's point is not just that what was potential becomes actual when provided with the proper conditions, as, for example, the growth of a seed into a plant is sometimes understood (Cf. LW 9:195-96). His point is rather that persons are incomplete without a social component and develop into what they are—individual members of groups, socially grounded selves—in the ongoing process of living in a social environment.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, we can argue that the Mencian "inklings" (*siduan*) of the heartmind are not inborn and essential qualities that in and of themselves make us human "beings." These "inklings" are certainly native

and incipient as the initial relational conditions that bind us into our families. But they are only the largely dependent beginnings of a process of growth in associated living that need to be nourished to make us full, active participants in family and community. The *siduan* describe the particular ethical, aesthetic, cognitive, and religious beginnings whence human beings emerge. The Confucian project, then, is to incorporate inchoate yet organically interdependent persons within the family nexus and to transform them into eager participants in a flourishing and thus spiritual community.

Dewey invests enormously in the centrality of language and other modes of communicative discourse (including signs, symbols, gestures, and social institutions) in explaining how the community grows its persons:

Through speech a person dramatically identifies himself with potential acts and deeds; he plays many roles, not in successive stages of life but in a contemporaneously enacted drama. Thus mind emerges.¹⁴⁶

For Dewey, mind is "an added property assumed by a feeling creature, when it reaches that organized interaction with other living creatures which is language, communication."¹⁴⁷ For Dewey, then, what we might call "heartmind" is created in the process of realizing a world. Heartmind, like world, is *becoming* rather than *being*, and the question is how productive and enjoyable are we able to make this creative process. The way in which heartmind and world are changed is not simply in terms of human attitude, but in real growth and productivity, and in the efficiency and pleasure that attends this process. The alternative—for a community to fail to communicate effectively—is for the community to wither, leaving it vulnerable to the "mindless" violence and "heartless" atrocities of creatures that have failed to become human.

In Confucianism, as in Deweyan pragmatism, the process of personal and communal development is driven by effective communication. To cite Dewey:

Everything which is distinctively human is learned, not native, even though it could not be learned without native structures which mark man off from other animals. To learn in a human way and to human effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities. To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an

effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands its beliefs, desires, and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values.¹⁴⁸

Dewey's position expressed here might on the surface seem to contradict that voiced in the *Mencius* when the latter claims:

The capacities that people have without having learned them are the root of their capacities; the wisdom that people have without having reflected upon it is the root of their wisdom. There are no young children who do not know to love their parents, and on coming of age, there are none who do not know to respect their elders. Loving one's parents is being consummate; respecting one's elders is being appropriate. There is no other reason that these habits can prevail in the world.¹⁴⁹

But neither Dewey nor Mencius would dispute the fact that all activity is a collaboration between persons and their environments, and this being so, that persons bring significant capacities with them in their various activities that are a function of their initial conditions. Dewey is focusing on the transactional nature of all human conduct that is invariably entails a "doing and an undergoing," while Mencius is insisting that all action invariably has a subjective dimension to it, and that becoming moral is not entirely derived from some external source. The key lies in understanding that when Mencius rejects the claim that virtuous conduct is derived from something "external" (*wai 外*), he is not alternatively claiming that such conduct is entirely a matter of actualizing and manifesting some internal nature independent of the external circumstances of one's roles and relations.¹⁵⁰ Rather, he is asserting, like Dewey after him, that person and personal growth are both a collaboration between an emerging subject and a more-or-less objective world.

Dewey is helpful in providing insight into the inseparability of person and context, but in spite of the development of his relationally constituted person as a radical departure from an entrenched foundational individualism, in spite of his sustained commitment to the ultimacy and the complexity of the concrete situation in his rejection of an abstract moral idealism, and most importantly, in spite of his awareness of the vital role of early childhood education and his own intense personal experience

as a much-engaged parent, he still does not develop the seemingly obvious implication that the generalizable site of associated growth for most people is going to be their families. Indeed, the uniquely Confucian perception of how we become persons departs fundamentally from the Deweyan conception of personal cultivation in its stress upon our immediate family roles and relations as the entry point and the ground for acquiring moral competence.¹⁵¹

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 within their own tradition 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 principles, values, and virtues, are located in and derived from actual life experience within one's specific roles and relations in family and community.

As noted above, if we rehearse the important contributions of what are acknowledged to be the most prominent Western philosophers across the centuries, with few exceptions we are hard-pressed to find any significant thinker who invokes family as a productive model for organizing and optimizing the human experience. Plato's rejection of the family in the *Republic* and Aristotle's denigration of the "household" (*oikos*) as a source of privation are fairly representative.¹⁵² Even John Dewey, whose relational cosmology and emphasis on the great community offers frequent analogy with Confucian assumptions, is true to the mainstream of his own tradition, opining that China has to get beyond its traditional family system as a precondition for democratization.¹⁵³

Undoubtedly this persisting indifference to the importance of the perceived "partial" relations that emerge from family feeling is closely aligned with the assumed centrality of impartiality as a necessary condition for ethical conduct pervasive among those philosophers who would look to universal principles, objective procedures, impersonal teleological uniformities, and moral reasoning as the ultimate source of and warrant for moral order. Such a disinterest in family as a measure of moral order in the Western philosophical narrative contrasts starkly with the Confucian worldview in which family is *the* governing metaphor, and in which in fact *all* relationships are familial.¹⁵⁴ It is the uniqueness

of this Confucian moral sensibility that has led Henry Rosemont and me to describe it as "Confucian role ethics" in an effort to distinguish it from other more familiar ethical theories.¹⁵⁵ The signature of Confucian role ethics that will be further developed in the next chapter is that immediate family feeling is not only the entry point for an educated moral competence, but is also an inspiration and model for optimizing order in all of the dimensions of human life. Indeed, family feeling is the foundational moral epistemology of Confucian philosophy. We know each other primarily through our empathetic feelings for each other.

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

In the *Mencius* and other canonical Confucian texts, the familiar appeal to the horticultural and husbanding metaphors—knowing the "root," for example—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 in fact what makes horticulture and husbanding apposite analogies for relationally constituted "human beings" is the acute dependence that farming and raising animals has upon a contrived environment and upon concentrated human effort. Without sustained 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 crows, and most eggs become omelets. 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."

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 exclusive of what is derived from that point. Geographically, the source of the Yangtze river is the Himalayas. When we introduce the idea of efficient cause, the source becomes something analytically independent of the product that it causes, creates, initiates. It is the maker from which whatever is made is derived. Such

notions of "source" have no relevance to *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 *dao* as "source" we might cite the *Daodejing* that states "*dao* emulates what is spontaneously so of itself."¹⁵⁶ 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 in the ongoing process of what humans have become is no less relevant to this notion of source than where they have come from so far. The source is the collaborative, open-ended nature of human 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 inkings, something inborn "within" the person that is 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 from the specific, contingent transactions that, in 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 antecedent and ready-made, it evolves *pari passu* 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.¹⁵⁷ The argument, then, is that the preponderance of the content of "human nature" (*renxing* 人性) as it is expressed in the habitude of "consummatory conduct" (*ren* 仁),

"acting optimally appropriate in meaningful relations" (*yi*), "achieving propriety in roles and relations" (*li* 禮), and "acting with intelligence and wisdom" (*zhi* 智) is acquired. "Natural tendencies" (*xing* 性) are no more an essential and inborn given than is "consummatory conduct" (*ren*). Both are a source and a product. That is, they are the articulation of tentative native conditions in the consequent process of habituation. "Acting with wisdom" is not applying an antecedent wisdom to a situation, but an informed quality of acting that arises with the efficacy of one's actions.

What makes "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 and 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 natural and cultural context, and the human experience" (*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.

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—it is not some independent "first cause"—but rather is 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, that constitute the propensity of circumstances, and that can be calibrated and adjusted to produce welcome outcomes.

There is a fallacy in taking human nature as causal in the sense that it reduplicates itself in action—that is, 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 independent causal 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. It is with this understanding of the Confucian relationally constituted person as a "human becoming" that we now turn to Confucian role ethics as concrete familial and communal guidelines for achieving consummatory habits of conduct, and to the alternative understanding of religiousness that emerges from them.