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Individualism and Personhood

From the standpoint of the Chinese population as a whole, the family was the predominant social and economic institution in an agricultural society, and in many respects it furnished the theoretical model for other institutions such as the patriarchal dynastic state. But as a literate tradition Confucianism was also concerned from the start with individuals in relation to each other, as well as with the role of the scholar-official in his relations with the ruler and other scholars, teachers, and students.

Classically the paradigm of human relationships was stated by Mencius as:

Between parent and child there is to be affection
Between ruler and minister, rightness
Between husband and wife, [gender] distinctions
Between older and younger [siblings] an order of
precedence
Between friends, trustworthiness.
[Mencius 3A:4]

Since this paradigm was strongly reaffirmed in later (especially Neo-Confucian) tradition, as well as in other East Asian countries, we should note some of its implications. First, it focuses on human moral relationships and the priorities among them, particularly within the family. The setting of personal priorities and making of value distinctions is fundamental to Confucianism.

Next it should be noted that all of these relations involve reciprocity. The obligations are differentiated but mutual and shared. Thus, for instance, the relation between parents and child is not characterized exclusively in terms of the filial duty of child to parent, but in terms of mutual affection; and in other formulations of the husband/wife relationship, the same mutual affection and love is stressed.

It is also true that the respect for precedence (seniority), here identified particularly with the sibling relationship, was more broadly generalized in practice to apply to all five relationships, so that, for instance, the relationship of friends, here spoken of in terms of *xin*, mutual trust and reliability and thus based on mutuality and equality, was often analogized to that of older and younger brother (i.e., fictively, between persons who were not actually blood relations). Similarly the relation of ruler and minister was in later discourse often analogized to that of parent and child (though this was also disputed by leading Confucians, who saw the ruler/minister relationship as a collegial one).

Nevertheless, in this classic formulation of moral relations it is as striking that the ruler/minister relationship should contain no reference to loyalty as it is noteworthy that the parent/child relationship should lack any reference to filial piety. In later common (popular) discourse loyalty and filial piety are often spoken of as the typical Confucian virtues, and it is to this customary Confucian formula that implicit reference is made by those today who look to Confucianism as a support for superior authority. Yet loyalty and filial piety are totally missing here. From this one can see the incongruity in the recent news from Singapore, reporting the enactment of legal processes to compel children to meet their filial obligation to support their parents. Chinese law, it is true, traditionally recognized the importance of filial obligation, and the state often honored it, but it was considered rare and abnormal for such cases to come before a magistrate. Such matters were to be settled in the home or local

neighborhood. And it is clear that Confucius, as recorded in the *Analects*, would have nothing to do with mindless conformism or coercive measures to enforce filial duty. Many passages affirm Confucius's belief that a forced or mechanical conformity to the norms of filial duty was not filial piety at all.¹ Indeed, Confucius pointedly insisted on moral cultivation and consensual social rituals, rather than legal compulsion, as the way to deal with such human problems. This underscores how pertinent to the present situation is the historic experience of China with a genuine, but neglected tradition of Confucian ritual in the authentic communitarian, rather than the authoritarian, law-and-order form.

Those familiar with high Confucian tradition and its finer nuances would be more conscious of the particular implications of Mencius's dwelling on the ruler/minister relation rather than on what is sometimes translated as "ruler/subject." Insofar as any subject might participate in governance, the same principle would apply, but in fact, as Mencius well understood, most "subjects" did not so participate in the political process, and what Mencius had in mind (as is the case later on with most Confucian scholarly literature) was the particular but at the same time mutual obligation of ruler and minister to adhere to what is right, and to consider the relationship at an end if they cannot agree on what is right. In this case undying loyalty attaches to principle, not persons.

In modern times awareness of this basic Confucian teaching has often been lost, and superficial notions of unquestioning loyalty to the ruler have taken over. But as late as the Ming and Qing dynasties, Mencius was well understood by those familiar with his teachings as reaffirmed by the great Neo-Confucian scholar-teacher Zhu Xi. Spectacular cases can be cited of heroic Confucian ministers standing up for what was right against all the despotic power of Ming rulers. One of the most celebrated cases is that of the outstanding Confucian scholar/minister Fang Xiaoru (1357–1402). Fang defied the Yongluo Emperor, who

tried to silence him by threatening death not only to Fang himself but to all his kin as far as the ninth degree of relationship, if Fang did not cease his remonstrance against the Emperor. Fang did not yield, and all his family paid the price.

Another case is that of the Ming official Hai Rui (1513–1587), whose martyrdom was cited in the Mao era by the historian and playwright Wu Han as an example of courageous criticism of the ruler. In this instance Hai Rui's example was taken as an oblique reference to Peng Dehuai, a critic of Mao Zedong's policies. Mao, while encouraging people to speak out, reserved to himself the right to have them punished for it, as, indeed, Peng and Wu were.

An even more revealing example of the "freedom of speech" issue is the case of the founding emperor of the Ming, Taizu (r. 1368–1398), no less of a despot for being a peasant and populist. Taizu sought to reserve to himself the prerogative of offering the ritual sacrifice to Confucius, and to withdraw this privilege (with its accompanying authority) from local Confucian officials who had performed it since at least the Tang dynasty. Then, after expurgating the text of *Mencius* (used in the civil service examinations) of what he considered contumacious passages insulting to rulers, Taizu sought further to have Mencius's tablet removed from the Confucian temple. When his Confucian ministers objected, Taizu threatened death to any who opposed him, whereupon the minister Qian Tang, when he next came to court, brought with him a coffin, saying: "It would be an honor to die for Mencius."²

Taizu's attempt to suppress ministerial opposition goes to the heart of Mencius's dictum that the ruler/minister relationship should be governed by mutual respect for what is right. It is not, then, a matter of legal rights or of free speech in general, but of what Confucians would call proper respect or civility in the decorum that should prevail at court. In other words, it came under the Confucian heading of ritual decorum—of "rites" and not of legal rights or entitlements. (Indeed, in whatever ruling

court or cabinet would not the conduct of such debate be a matter of personal decorum or civility, rather than one of legal rights?)

The further significance of the episode lies in the specificity of the personal relations involved. This is freedom of speech in the particular context of the ruler/minister relationship. By logical and natural extension it could apply to any subject who entered into such a personal or collegial association with the emperor (or into his official service), but ministerial remonstrance could not be taken as a right generally enjoyed by all subjects. It amounts then only to a restricted or limited freedom of speech, yet at the same time, asserted here as a basic human principle it is extendable to others who might assume that duty, and could become applicable to any wider extension of people's participation in the political process. In other words, embedded here in a particular personal, historical, and institutional context is a classic case of a Confucian universal human value. One could quibble about it and say that the Confucian case does not exactly fit the modern understanding of human rights, but if instead one is disposed to respect human values as experienced and expressed in different cultural settings, one could recognize here a rough parallel to the prophetic, protesting voice in other times and places, as in ancient Israel and thereafter in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Confucian "rightness" in the ruler/minister relation does not exactly correspond to the "righteousness" of God invoked by the Hebrew prophets, with which God's "people" were to identify themselves, but as it was associated in Confucianism with the order ordained by Heaven (*Tian*) this "rightness" had a universal aspect as well as a particularistic one: it characterized the special relationship of ruler and minister as meant to serve the larger public interest and general welfare (*gong*).

On this basis, in the modern period reformers could take Confucian principle as indigenous Chinese cultural soil in which to ground legal rights and democratic institutions. Indeed, since the

Japanese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shared the same Confucian moral ground, they claimed it as the basis and rationale for the adoption of “people’s rights” and parliamentary institutions in the Meiji period, to be followed in this shortly afterward by Chinese reformers who likewise sought to interpret Western democratic institutions in Confucian terms and transplant them to Chinese soil.

“Transplant” is a key word here, because it leaves open the question of how such institutions, developed in the West, could become rooted, grow, and thrive, or perhaps not, in soil that was admittedly foreign and yet at the same time recognizably human, irreducibly both common and diverse. To get a perspective on this modern adaptation, however, we must look further into the relationship of the individual and the community, so much at issue in the charge that Western human rights thinking is too individualistic for the more communitarian “Asian” traditions; then further we should consider this in relation to the Chinese historical process as it emerged from the time of Confucius and Mencius down through the imperial dynasties to the modern era. Indeed to my mind, the weakness of many discussions of China, Confucianism, and human rights, is that they tend to operate purely on the conceptual level—attempting to compare or contrast values in the abstract, rather than seeing how they have been observed and experienced in time, in a developing historical process.

First, let us examine the status of the “individual” in Confucian thought. Spokesmen for what is called an “Asian” communitarian position are not wrong in supposing that the concept of a radically free-standing, autonomous individual is foreign to Confucianism, but the contrast is more with the modern age than it is with some earlier Western traditions, themselves more communitarian, (or even with contemporary communitarian movements in the West that react against the recent trend). Modern libertarian individualism, as a product of rapid economic devel-

opment and social change, presents the individual with a new abundance of “choices” to be made, while the extraordinary power of modern technology inspires and inflates the dream of unlimited expansiveness and liberation from all constraints. However, today these are phenomena of both East and West, wherever industrialization takes place; it is not a case of East *versus* West. Moreover, advocates of a traditional Asian “communitarianism” are wrong if they suppose—as Western writers too often have done—that in Confucianism the individual’s worth is found only in the group, that he is no more than the sum of the social roles he is expected to perform, or that he is content with subordination to the group and established authority.

Confucius himself in the opening line of the *Analects* sets the matter in perspective when he speaks first of learning [from past tradition] and practicing it in the present; then of welcoming friends from afar [to share experiences with them]; and finally of characterizing the truly noble man as one who is unembittered even if he is unrecognized by others [especially the ruler]. The first two lines express the idea of a self shaped in the process of learning from others, but the last line conveys the sense that this should produce a person able to stand on his own. Later in the *Analects* this process is spoken of as “learning for one’s self,” in contrast to “learning for the sake of others’ [approval],”—that is to say, for true self-development, rather than to gain social acceptance or political advancement.

This concept of a fully realized personhood is reaffirmed in Confucius’ concise résumé of his own life experience:

At fifteen I set my heart on learning.
At thirty I was established [stood on my own feet].
At forty I had no perplexities.
At fifty I learned what Heaven commanded of me.
By sixty my ear had become attuned to it.
At seventy I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing.³

Here Confucius characterizes his life-long learning as centered on his own self-development and self-fulfillment in the course of meeting the demands of Heaven. If we are to judge from the rest of the *Analects*, what he learned had much to do with his relationship to others and his sense of responsibility for them, but here he describes his life experience as one of inner growth in response to the providential guidance of Heaven—Heaven as representing a higher moral authority in the universe, and Heaven’s Way as defining his own mission in life. In his case “Heaven’s command” (*Tianming*) is not the same as a dynastic mandate, though it shares with that mandate responsibility for what Heaven ordains morally and politically. Instead his is a very personal commission and vocation to public service that demands difficult and unexpected things of him, not easily accepted at first, but eventually bringing a sense of personal freedom and self-fulfillment.

This is no less true of the human condition and the human ideal as we see it in Mencius, for whom the Way and the imperatives of Heaven are found in the inmost depths of one’s own being, just as the sense of “rightness (*yi*)” is said by him to spring from within one’s deepest natural sentiments. Moreover, among the other two classic texts that for later Confucians constitute the canonical Four Books, the *Mean* (*Zhong yong*), while paying due respect to social roles and obligations, extols above all personal sincerity or integrity (*cheng*), which means being true to one’s innermost self, especially when one is not observed by others or answerable to them. In the same vein the famous Eight Items of the *Great Learning* give clear priority in the first five items to the individual’s self-development, before extending this further to family or state.

It is these texts and these concepts that later became formative of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation, reaffirming the morally responsible and affectively responsive self in the face of profound philosophical challenges from Buddhism and Daoism. And it is

this same sense of the Way and its rightness, deep within one's self, from which a long line of Ming Neo-Confucian scholars from Qian Tang, Fang Xiaoru, Hai Rui and on down to Liu Zongzhou, drew the conviction and courage to challenge Ming despots. When one risks one's life in order to be true to one's own inmost self, it cannot be thought of as merely performing for others, fulfilling a social role or conforming to the values of the group. Though it would be equally inappropriate to call this self-centeredness simply a form of "individualism" (if by that one means individual freedom of choice or emancipation from social constraints), it does affirm a strong moral conscience, shaped and formed in a social, cultural process that culminates, at its best, in a sense of self-fulfillment within society and the natural order. Given its special Confucian features, one might call this a distinct "Confucian individualism," but I prefer the term "personalism" to "individualism," since it shares some common ground with forms of personalism in Western tradition as distinct from a modern liberationist "individualism." Here "personalism" expresses the worth and dignity of the person, not as a raw, "rugged" individual, but as a self shaped and formed in the context of a given cultural tradition, its own social community, and its natural environment to reach full personhood.⁴

On a portentous occasion in Hong Kong, anticipating its takeover by the People's Republic of China, Professor Anthony Yu of the University of Chicago discussed some of the issues at stake there. He described one factor threatening the future of education: the view that in China the collectivity always takes precedence over the individual, which inhibits the pursuit of truth for its own sake. Characterizing the Western educational tradition as "grounded upon the supreme good of individual self-fulfillment," he contrasted this to the Chinese tradition wherein "political and moral virtues unite as an indivisible homology in which the communal and collective take precedence over the individual."⁵

This is not a new view in the West, and of course, in China it

is one the state is glad enough to accept. It remains nonetheless questionable as a characterization of the Confucian standpoint, which looked for a balanced relation between self and society. Although Confucius himself spoke for and to an educated class of scholar-officials, whose sense of political responsibility was inseparable from their privileged status as beneficiaries and custodians of a civilized learning tradition, he had little success himself in government and had to reconcile himself to a life of scholarship and teaching. In the end, however, he insisted that teaching and education themselves fulfilled the obligation of public service—one need not take office in order to fulfill this duty.⁶

No doubt Confucius had something of this in mind when he spoke, in the paradigmatic account of his own life-experience cited above, about how he came, albeit slowly and reluctantly, to accept what Heaven ordained for him: that is, learning in what capacity he could conscientiously fulfill Heaven's commission (his political vocation) as he tried to cope with the specific life situation Heaven presented to him—the difficulty he encountered in trying to obtain official employment on terms consistent with his principles. Could we perhaps call this belated discovery of his true vocation (teaching, not serving in office) an affirmation of "truth" as the supreme value? In Western terms, yes, we might, but in Confucian terms not exactly congruent with our own, it would more likely be expressed as Confucius's adherence to and following of the right Way (*Dao*).

When taunted for his fastidious refusal to serve rulers if it meant being coopted by them for unworthy purposes, while yet he persisted stubbornly in the idealistic hope of political reform, Confucius replied: "One cannot herd with the beasts or flock with the birds. If I am not to serve in the company of other human beings (i.e., act as a responsible social being), then what am I to do? If the Way prevailed among men, I would not be trying to change things."⁷

Here Confucius insists on the following of the Way as a higher duty than simply taking office, and, without abandoning the moral struggle, persists in acting on behalf of the Way to reform an imperfect human society. Clearly he did not take service of the state, or subordination to the established order, as an ultimate obligation. Rather for him, pursuit of the Way came close to what Professor Yu has called “the pursuit of truth” in the West. Yet if one considers that both “Truth” in the West and the “Way” in China open out on unlimited horizons, and in some indefinable way ultimately converge, there would seem to be little use in drawing a fine line between them—much less in opening up a large chasm between East and West on this score.

The more relevant distinction to be made here is one Confucians drew between the Way of the Ruler and the Way of the Teacher. Ideally (in ancient legend) these two roles had been joined as one in the sage-kings, but by Confucius’s time the Way had become split apart. For all later Confucians, Confucius as teacher and not as ruler was the personification of sageliness, the highest standard and model for anyone to follow. No later ruler ever commanded the same respect.

Another point of common confusion in regard to the issue of the individual versus the community or collectivity has been in positing the dichotomy of public (*gong*) and private (*si*) as necessarily an antithetical one—“public” as standing for the common good, and “private,” negatively, for individual selfishness. It is true that these concepts are sometimes found in opposition, as when individual desires are seen to conflict with the common good. This is the case in the section on the “Evolution of Rites” in the *Record of Rites* compiled in the Han dynasty, which contrasts the primordial ideal of “all-under-Heaven as shared in common” (*Tianxia weigong*) with the historical reality of people pursuing their own private interests at others’ expense—a social condition Confucius himself had to face and was unable to change, sage though he was. In the same *Record of Rites*, there is also a discus-

sion of the opposition between “Heaven’s principles” (identified here with the common good) and “human desires” (understood here to be “selfish”). In the given context however, this dichotomy refers to actions of the ruler that are selfish, when properly he should be acting in the common interest and holding himself to a higher, self-sacrificial standard of service to the public good.⁸ Indeed, the implication of the passage is that the ruler should not indulge his own selfish desires at the expense of the people’s legitimate desires, appetites, and material needs. It is not a question of ordinary persons sacrificing their natural desires to the group.

Thus, though “Heaven’s principles” and “human desires” are juxtaposed in this case, it is not meant to suggest a necessary opposition or conflict between private and public, individual and collectivity, but rather to assert the obligation of rulers to uphold a public standard that keeps in balance individual desires and the common good. Even the great Confucian thinker, Xunzi, though he is generally identified with the view of human nature as evil, subscribed to this idea that the social order should aim at the satisfaction of people’s desires.⁹

The same issue arises in the famous Han dynasty “Debate on Salt and Iron.” Here the spokesmen for the state claim that their instituting of state monopolies over key resources, their maintaining of state marketing controls, and their general policy of state intervention in the economy is meant to defend the public interest against private exploitation. In this debate, however, spokesmen for the Confucians argue against this, charging that such regulation and intervention is contrary to the people’s interest, which would be better served by a free market economy and private enterprise, allowing “the people” to act in their own interest and on their own initiative. In this debate, both sides claim to speak for the public interest, but it is the Confucians who argue that this interest is better served by encouraging the people’s private initiative, while the bureaucrats’ claim to speak for

the public interest is questioned as only a cover for the pursuit of their own vested interests.

From this it may seem again that the Confucian ideal was a balance of public and private, not an assertion of one over the other. In fact, from the Confucian point of view the state's responsibility for the public interest was to encourage legitimate private initiative. How to define what was legitimate remained an issue, and the state, historically, was not slow to assert its own authority in this respect (any more than it is today), but Confucians were just as ready to challenge any such claim on the part of the state bureaucracy (*guan*), asserting instead that the public interest (*gong*) consists in serving the legitimate desires and material needs of the people.¹⁰ A balance of public and private (*gongsì yìtí*), not the person or individual subordinated to the collectivity or state, remained the Confucian ideal.

In much of what follows the historical dominance of the state will be apparent, but this being the fact, it is all the more important for us to recognize that its dominance did not go uncontested by the Confucians. Indeed, only in light of the continuing tension between the two can the true dimensions and complexity of the problem be appreciated.