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## Theorizing “Person” in Confucian Ethics: A Good Place to Start\*

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### ABSTRACT

In the introduction of Chinese philosophy and culture into the Western academy, we have tended to theorize and conceptualize this antique tradition by appealing to familiar categories. Confucian role ethics is an attempt to articulate a *sui generis* moral philosophy that allows this tradition to have its own voice. This holistic philosophy is grounded in the primacy of relationality, and is a challenge to a foundational liberal individualism that has defined persons as discrete, autonomous, rational, free, and often self-interested agents. Confucian role ethics begins from a relationally constituted conception of person, takes family roles and relations as the entry point for developing moral competence, invokes moral imagination and the growth in relations that it can inspire as the substance of human morality, and entails a human-centered, a-theistic religiousness that stands in sharp contrast to the Abrahamic religions.

**Keywords:** Confucian role ethics, individualism, “humane becomings,” focus-field conception of person, *ren* (“consummate virtuosity”), abstraction, Confucian relational person

### **The Problem: “It’s a Poor Sort of Memory that only Works Backwards”**

G. W. F. Hegel in the introduction to his *Encyclopaedia Logic* famously observes that one of the most difficult problems in any philosophical investigation is the question of where to begin. In this essay I will argue that the appropriateness of categorizing Confucian ethics as either role ethics or virtue ethics turns largely on the conception of “person” that is presupposed within the interpretive context of classical Chinese philosophy.<sup>1</sup> If our goal is to take the Confucian tradition on its own terms and to let it speak with its own voice without overwriting it with our own cultural importances, we must begin by first self-consciously and critically theorizing the Confucian conception of person as the starting point of Confucian ethics.

The problem of using Western categories to theorize Confucian philosophy is an old and persistent story. Kwong-loi Shun has recently made much of this asymmetry in how we make our cultural comparisons (2009, 470):

[T]here is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions. This trend is seen not only in works published in the English language, but also in those published in Chinese. Conversely, in the contemporary

literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions.

As perhaps an example of this problem, it is at the very least an interesting coincidence that most of our leading scholars—Fung You-lan and Guo Qiyong are good examples—were interpreting Chinese ethics as principle-based before Elisabeth Anscombe in her 1958 “Modern Moral Philosophy” essay challenged deontology and utilitarianism for being legalistic and lacking in moral psychology.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent turn from principle-based ethics to virtue ethics in Western normative theory precipitated by Anscombe’s challenge seems also to have occasioned an interpretive turn in our reading of Confucian ethics, where scholars have now come to embrace virtue ethics as the most apposite reading of this antique tradition. Said another way, remembering the White Queen’s musing that “it’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” for the recent encounter of Confucian ethics with Western ethical theory to be taken anachronistically as its defining moment might be a good example of this putatively better kind of memory.

In our own time, but with deep roots in the classical Greek philosophical narrative, individualism has become a default, commonsense assumption, if not an ideology. That is, individualism has become an ideology when, in our own post-Marxist, post-collectivist era, it has garnered a monopoly on human consciousness without any serious alternative to challenge it. I will argue that the language of virtue ethics, in broadly appealing as it does to the vocabulary of agents, acts, generic virtues, character traits, autonomy, motivation, reasons, choice, freedom, principles, consequences, and so on, introduces distinctions that assume this foundational individualism as its starting point.

And further, I will claim that Confucian ethics by contrast begins from the wholeness of experience, and is formulated by invoking a radically different focus-field cluster of terms and distinctions with fundamentally different assumptions about how personal identities emerge in our human narratives, and how moral competence is expressed as an achieved virtuosity in the roles and relationships that come to constitute us. To fail to distinguish what I will call individual human “beings” from relationally-constituted “humane becomings,” then, would mean that we have willy-nilly insinuated a contemporary and decidedly foreign notion of person into our investigation before it has even begun.

\* This essay is excerpted from a book length monograph by the same title that is presently in progress.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that we need the term “role” in the English expression “Confucian role ethics,” but it is redundant if we use the Chinese because “role” is already there in the language of “Confucian ethics” (儒學倫理學) with the term *lun* 倫 itself meaning “human roles and relations.” Although *lunlixue* as a translation of “ethics” is a modern term, the binomial *lunli* dates back to Han dynasty sources. That this same term *lun* also means “category” and “class” suggests that the construction of such discriminations as “categories” is a function of correlations and analogy rather than some assumed shared essence or identical characteristic (*eidos*).

<sup>2</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958).

**Taking Stock: “Something that is good for each of us, considered individually, may not be good for all of us.”<sup>3</sup>**

If individual autonomy and equality are high values within the virtue ethics discourse—values that necessarily bring with them corollaries such as rationality, freedom, rights, and personal choice—the counterpart to these values in Confucian role ethics are relational equity and an achieved diversity. Autonomy and equality give us a relatively barren sense of variety—we certainly have differences among us that we do our best to register and tolerate, but we are still equal as individuals. Such variety stands in rather stark contrast with the real diversity that can only be achieved by fully activating and appreciating our differences from each other—that is, not just differing from each other, but differing for each other. Both autonomy and equality are grounded in a doctrine of external relations that subordinate our relations to our individual selves, our interdependence with each other to our personal integrity, and our differences to our sameness. That is, maintaining comparative equality and individualism guarantees that difference can only be variation (variety) rather than diversification (diversity) and relations can only be external rather than intrinsic and constitutive. The alternative to comparative equality and individualism is *equity* (as the heightened realization of dynamically shared well-being) and *diversity* (as the full appreciation of the creative possibilities of any situation by conserving and coordinating differences).

Peter Hershock appeals to the Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach as a case in point where retaining the notions of individual and equality sets limits on the opportunity for mutual appreciation that equity and diversity would entail (2012, 239):

Thus, while Sen (1985) is entirely correct in calling attention to a detrimental bias in much of GCs [Global Commons] and GPGs [Global Public Goods] discourses toward focusing on resources rather than freedoms, it is crucial to resist understanding freedom either as an achieved state of affairs or (as Sen does) as an achieved set of capabilities for exercising real choices in pursuit of one’s own, individual interest. If . . . dynamic equity is a function of attenuating self-other and individual-collective polarizations of interest, the extent to which freedom can be affirmed . . . is the extent to which it connotes demonstrating contributory and appreciative virtuosity, not the dualistic, self- and other-reifying exercise of choice.”

For Confucian role ethics, our interdependence in our lived roles—that is, the fact that excellent teachers and excellent students come together or not at all—precludes familiar assumptions about individual autonomy, and subordinates personal choice to our continuing commitment (*cheng* 誠) within these roles as teachers and students. Relational equity emerges with mutual appreciation and contribution. And given the focus-field conception of person—that is, the entire family is implicated within each member—we are ultimately what we mean for each other, and continue to flourish on that basis. The strong family prospers

<sup>3</sup> Peter D. Hershock, *Valuing Diversity: Buddhist Reflection on Realizing a More Equitable Global Future* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 133.

because one member is a virtuosic violinist, another is a forceful politician, and yet another is a highly respected scholar, where each member is much enhanced by virtue of the quality of their intimate relations and the growth in value provided through mutual appreciation. Where putative equality would subordinate if not disrespect our differences, a productive diversity is achieved only when such differences make a difference for each other, and the more difference they do make, the higher the quality of diversity.

**“Human Beings or “Humane Becomings?”**

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

How or *in what way* (*dao* 道) do persons in their roles *become* consummately humane (*ren* 仁)? This then was the perennial Confucian question asked explicitly in all of the *Four Books*: in *The Great Learning*, in the *Analects of Confucius*, in the *Mencius*, and again in *Focusing the Familiar* (*Zhongyong*). And the answer from the time of Confucius, was a moral, aesthetic, and ultimately religious one. Persons (necessarily plural) *become* human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute our initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of our life narrative—its inseparable whence, hither, and whither—within family, community, and cosmos.<sup>4</sup> “Cultivate your persons”—*xiushen* 修身—the signature exhortation of the Confucian canons—is the ground of the Confucian project of becoming consummate as persons (*ren*): it is to cultivate our conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that we live. And in this Confucian tradition, the “I” is irreducibly “we” in the sense that we need each other to become persons: If there is only one person, there are no persons.<sup>5</sup> Becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all.

What is at stake here is the answer to perhaps our most basic and important philosophical question: How should we understand what it means to become fully human? How do we explain birth, life, and growth of the human “being”?—by reduplicative causal accounts (the infant is a ready-made adult), by teleological accounts (the infant is simply preliminary to the existing ideal), or as humane “becomings” that appeals to a contextual, narrative account available to us through a phenomenology of deliberate personal action? How do we define what it means to be a human “being”?—by speculative assumptions about innate, isolatable causes that locate persons outside of the roles and relations in which they live their lives,

<sup>4</sup> See *Analects* 12.1: “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes consummate in one’s conduct” (克己復禮為仁). All translations are from Ames and Rosemont (1998).

<sup>5</sup> “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings.” Herbert Fingarette, “The Music of Humanity in the Conversations of Confucius,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10 (1983), 217.

or alternatively, as having “become” human by taking account of the initial, native conditions and context within which persons are inextricably embedded, and then by assaying the full aggregation of consequent action as their life stories unfold?

As I have observed above, in our own world a foundational “individualism” has become an ideology without any robust alternatives. And we must ask whether our own seemingly default commonsense assumptions about *individual* human “beings” are consistent with the Confucian project as it was situated and developed within the natural process cosmology that serves this tradition as the context for such personal growth.

### **The Confucian Project: Person as an Achieved Relational Virtuosity**

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

Confucius by developing his insights around the most basic and enduring aspects of the ordinary human experience—personal cultivation in family and communal roles, family reverence, deference in our conduct with others, friendship, a cultivated sense of shame, education, community, a human-centered religiousness, and so on—has guaranteed their continuing relevance. In addition to being focused on perennial issues, one further characteristic of Confucianism that is certainly there in the words of Confucius himself, and that has made his teachings so resilient in this living tradition, is their porousness and adaptability. His contribution was simply to strive to take full ownership of the cultural legacy of his time, to adapt the wisdom of the past to his own present historical moment, and then to recommend to future generations that they continue to do the same.<sup>6</sup>

The personal model of Confucius that is remembered in the *Analects* does not purport to lay out some generic formula by which everyone should live their lives. Rather, the text recalls the narrative of one special person: How he in his relations with others cultivated his humanity, and how he lived a fulfilling life, much to the admiration of those around him. Indeed, in reading the *Analects*, we encounter the relationally constituted Confucius making his way through life by living his many roles as best he can: as a caring family member, as a strict teacher and mentor, as a scrupulous and incorruptible scholar-official, as a concerned neighbor and member of the community, as an always critical political consultant, as the grateful progeny of his progenitors, as an enthusiastic heir to a specific cultural legacy, and indeed, as a member of a chorus of joyful boys and men singing their way home after a happy day on the river Yi.<sup>7</sup> In his teachings, he favors

<sup>6</sup> *Analects* 7.1.

<sup>7</sup> *Analects* 11.26.

historical models over principles, analogies over theories, and exhortations over imperatives. The power and lasting value of his insights lie in the fact that, as I will endeavor to show, these ideas are intuitively persuasive, and readily adaptable to the conditions of ensuing generations, including our own.

Indeed, what makes Confucianism more empirical than empiricism—that is, what makes Confucianism a *radical* empiricism—is the fact that it is prospective in respecting the uniqueness of the particular—in this case, the particular narrative of this one special person, Confucius, who lived an exemplary life. Rather than advancing universal principles and assuming a taxonomy of natural kinds grounded in some notion of strict identity, Confucianism proceeds from analogy with and always provisional generalizations derived from those *particular* historical instances of successful living, the specific events recounted in the narrative of Confucius himself being one concrete case in point. And as an exemplar within the tradition, Confucius is corporate as ensuing generations continue to defer to this model in the way in which they live their lives.

### The Confucian Focus-Field Conception of Person

In appealing to an understanding of Chinese natural cosmology as the interpretive context of the Confucian person, I want to introduce a language cluster that will distinguish this worldview from the reductive, single-ordered, “One-behind-the-many” ontological model that grounds classical Greek metaphysical thinking about both persons and cosmos wherein one comes to “understand” the many by knowing retrospectively the foundational and causal ideal that lies behind them.

Instead, we find that in Chinese cosmology there is a symbiotic and holistic focus-field model of order that is illustrated rather concisely in the organic, ecological sensibilities of the *Great Learning* 大學. The meaning of the family is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each of its members, and by extension, the meaning of the entire cosmos is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each person within family and community. Tang Junyi takes a holographic, interdependent, and productive relationship between “part” and “whole” as *the* distinguishing feature and most crucial contribution of Chinese culture broadly, seeing in this relationship:

... the spirit of symbiosis and mutuality of particular and totality. From the perspective of understanding this means an unwillingness to isolate the particular from the totality (this is most evident in the cosmology of the Chinese people), and from the perspective of ties of feeling and affection, it means the commitment of the particular to do its best to realize the totality (this is most evident in the attitude of the Chinese people toward daily life).<sup>8</sup>

When this mutuality and interdependence of particulars and totality—better, foci

<sup>8</sup> Tang Junyi, *Complete Works*, vol. 11 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1988), 8: 中國文化之根本精神即 [將部分與全體交融互攝] 之精神；自認識上言之，即不自全體中劃出部分之精神（此自中國人之宇宙觀中最可見之）；自情意上言之，即努力以部分實現全體之精神（此自中國人之人生態度中可見之）。This proposition is an expression of the *yinyang* 陰陽 correlativity ubiquitous in Chinese cosmology that, in one of its most abstract iterations, entails the “continuity between reforming and functioning” (*tiyong heyi* 體用合一).

and fields, or ecologically situated “events” and their environments—that grounds Chinese cosmology is translated into the more concrete social and political arena of the human community, it becomes the value of inclusive, consensual, and optimally productive cooperation. The production of personal worth is the source of human culture, and human culture in turn is the aggregating resource that provides a context for each person’s cultivation. Through patterns of deference, the creative possibilities of a person’s conditions and the potency for self-construal are proportionately increased.

When personal virtuosity (*de* 德) is cultivated and the reach and influence of the conduct of such persons is extended efficaciously into their environments, the environments become increasingly adumbrated in the particular person. The distinction between *dao* 道 and *de*—between field and focus—fades as the individuating capacity of *de* (intensity) is symbiotically transformed into its integrating capacity (extensiveness). That is to say, in the person of the sage—Confucius, for example—the enhanced, resolute focus of his *de* extends without discontinuity to pervade the indeterminate field of his context. *De* is both uniquely particular (Confucius) and his particular, extensive field (the Chinese people as they come to be implicated in Confucius). One does not scratch Chinese culture or understand the Chinese community very deeply without encountering Confucius. *De* is both Confucius as *focus* and as his *focused field*.

The term “focus” originally referenced “domestic hearth” or “fireplace,” and is thus metonymic of family and genealogy, the governing metaphor in Chinese cosmology. Focus has come to mean “place of divergence and convergence” within a “field,” another term that like focus also has domestic, horticultural reference. I am using “field” here in the extended yet still domesticating sense as the sphere of influence of particular foci. At any given moment, the world available for *ars contextualis*—the art of construal in the human experience—can be characterized in terms of the focal point from, and to which, the lines of divergence and convergence attributable to them move and find resolution, and the field from which, and to which, those same lines proceed and have influence.

To take Confucius himself as a concrete example, we would have to allow that he is corporate in the sense that the lines of divergence and convergence that constitute his focus and meaning, proceed from and have influence throughout the entire field of the Chinese cultural tradition. Confucius is both unique focus and, to a significant degree, is also Chinese culture itself as his focused field.

### **Confucian Role Ethics and a Narrative Understanding of Persons**

What we are calling Confucian role ethics begins from the primacy of vital relationality—of lived roles and relations. Stated simply, it assumes the bare fact of associated living. The claim here is that nothing and no one does anything by itself. All physical and conscious activity is collaborative and transactional. But where association is merely descriptive, roles are normative. A person’s specific roles then—daughters and grandpas, teachers and neighbors, shopkeepers and lovers—are simply stipulated kinds of association that in their specificity take on a clear normative cast: Am I a good daughter? Am I a good teacher?

Role ethics is a properly “gerundive” and holistic, focus-field reading of this tradition that resists our seemingly default assumption that individuals as discrete entities are concrete existents rather than second order abstractions from their narratives, and that they can be accurately described, analyzed, and evaluated independently of their contextualizing environments, including first and foremost their dealings with other human beings. Role ethics begins from the assumption that, in any interesting moral or political sense, persons cannot be understood apart from the other persons with whom they interact, and that in fact persons are best described and evaluated in terms of the specific roles that guide their actions in their transactions with these specific others. Simply put, what is moral is conduct that conduces to growth and flourishing in the roles and relations we live together with others, and what is immoral is the opposite.

As observed above, virtue ethics broadly in appealing to the language of agents, acts, generic virtues, character traits, autonomy, motivation, reasons, choices, freedom, principles, consequences, and so on, assumes the individual human being as its starting point. Confucian role ethics, by contrast, is grounded in a more holistic and eventful “narrative” understanding of persons. As David B. Wong 黃百銳 reports (2014, 175):

The *Analects* thus shows a group with Confucius at the center, engaged in moral cultivation, each with a different configuration of strengths and weaknesses, not theorizing about it or giving philosophical justifications for it, but rather through their interactions providing a basis and inspiration for subsequent theorizing and justification by Confucius’ successors in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

This being the case, we have advanced Confucian role ethics not as an alternative “ethical theory,” but as a more capaciousness, *sui generis* vision of the moral life that begins from, and ultimately seeks its warrant in, the relatively straightforward account of the human experience that we find in the *Analects* and other early Confucian texts. We will argue that the normativity of role ethics arises from whole persons aspiring to live whole lives. We will attempt to make this argument for the scope of Confucian role ethics in what follows by responding to several fellow travelers—David Wong, Karyn Lai, and Steve Angle—who have offered welcome comments on and who have requested clarification about certain aspects of a Confucian roles ethics as we continue to search for the language to provide a sufficiently coherent account.

### **What is the Term for “Role Ethics” in the Classical Chinese Canons?**

A starting point for Henry Rosemont and me in trying to formulate this Confucian position is the stubborn ambiguity that attends the key philosophical term *ren* 仁 as it first occurs, and is then developed, in the *Analects of Confucius*.<sup>9</sup> It seems that

<sup>9</sup> Of course *ren* does appear as early as the Shang dynasty oracle bones and on the bronzes as well. While its meaning remains obscure on the oracle bones, it clearly means love and kindness on the bronzes. Our point is that while there are early yet infrequent occurrences of *ren*, this term only accrues substantial philosophical import with its development as a term of art in the *Analects*.

*ren* will not give itself up to the “what” question. In the more than 100 instances in which *ren* appears in this text, there seems to be a persistent eliding of a set of familiar, rather useful distinctions guaranteed at least in part by the grammar and inflections of our own English language. The function of these distinctions, in service to clarity and precision, is to abstract and isolate one or more aspects of persons from the unity of concrete experience: that is, an inner self from an outer world, agents from their actions, selves from others, a singular self from a field of selves, the means from the ends, mind from body, a person’s character from the whole person, virtuous character traits from an exemplary life, psychological dispositions from the behaviors that are informed by them, the specific virtuosic actions from a general and characteristic habitude, the abstract concept itself from the concrete narrative from which it is derived, specific instances of conduct from higher order generalizations made from them, and more.

Most if not all of these overlapping linguistic distinctions that fragment the continuity of personal experience make good sense to us because of our penchant for separating persons first from each other as individuals, and then again separating them from what they do. As we have seen, this is a habit of thinking that has deep roots in the ontology of our philosophical narrative. Indeed such a deracination of persons and their conduct is a persistent, uncritical assumption for those who would make the argument that Confucianism offers a virtue ethics with Chinese characteristics: that is, those who would claim that the early Confucian counterpart of the term “virtue” (*arete*) can be found in the term, *de* 德, and thus that the core ethical terminology in early Confucian ethical writings can be rendered into an aretaic vocabulary.

But as we witness with this term *ren*, in fact the *Analecets* seems to eschew severe distinctions between persons as individuals and between persons and their conduct. No one can become *ren* by themselves nor can anyone become *ren* by doing some generic and reduplicable *ren* action. The significance of *ren* is not only different for different people and for different situations, but moreover we even find cases in which the very opposite of what is recommended as *ren* in one case is encouraged in another.

For example, staying with one of Wong’s examples, we might compare the Master’s answer to Yan Hui’s question—“Yan Hui inquired about *ren*” (12.1)<sup>10</sup> with the answer he gives to exactly the same question when it is asked by Zhonggong (12.2), Sima Niu (12.3 and 4), Fan Chi (12.22), and Zigong (15.10). They are very different answers. But then Confucius sees Yan Hui and the others as very different students, and his answers mirror these perceived differences. In another case, when Confucius is asked the same question by Ranyou and Zilu (11.22)—that is, “On learning something, should one act upon it?” Confucius gives them precisely opposite answers—“yes” to Ranyou and “no” to Zilu. In all cases, as Confucius himself says when asked why he would give clearly contradictory counsel to these two students, Confucius’s response is appropriate to the demonstrated habituated capacities of the questioner: “Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu

<sup>10</sup> 颜渊问仁.

has the energy of two, and so I sought to rein him in.” *Ren* seems to be situation- and person-specific, to reference virtuosity in the conduct of the roles that we live, and to have a holistic, narrative quality to it. Indeed, I would argue that this holistic, specific, normative, and narrative meaning of *ren* allows us to claim that it is precisely the term *ren* that references role ethics in classical Confucianism.

And if we would defer to early Chinese cosmology as providing an alternative interpretive context for reading the *Analects* and the other classical Confucian texts—that is, an alternative cosmology that first and foremost gives primacy to vital relationality rather than to substance—we must question the relevance of our own commonsense distinctions about persons as individuals and their conduct to the extent that they violate the fundamental unity of experience entailed when we begin from this primacy of relationality. Said another way, the narrative ground of all ethical discourse in Confucian philosophy always renders such distinctions post hoc abstractions made from concrete and continuous episodes of associated conduct. What we are inclined to distinguish as erstwhile “individuals” and their “virtuous actions,” or “concepts” and their “narrative sources and applications,” are manifested in actuality as inseparable and nonanalytic aspects of the same experience.

### **Abjuring “the Perils of Abstraction”**

Bernard Williams in his search for “thick,” “world-guided” ethical concepts is famous for his reservations about the capacity of any moral theory to tell us what is right, what is wrong, and what we ought to do. In the preface to *Moral Luck*, for example, Williams announces (1981, ix-x):

There cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is, nor, despite the vigorous activities of some present practitioners, can there be an ethical theory, in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning.

And Alfred North Whitehead, who is often quoted as saying “we think in generalities, but we live in detail” also worries about the cost of the persisting imbalance that has us relying upon the ostensive clarity of abstract theory at the expense of the more murky and tentative world of practice. In rehearsing the history of philosophy, Whitehead accuses Epicurus, Plato, and Aristotle of being “unaware of the perils of abstraction” that render knowledge closed and complete. According to Whitehead, “the history of thought” that he associates with these great men (1938, 15):

. . . is a tragic mixture of vibrant disclosure and of deadening closure. The sense of penetration is lost in the certainty of completed knowledge. This dogmatism is the antichrist of learning. In the full concrete connection of things, the characters of the things connected enter into the character of the connectivity which joins them. . . . Every example of friendship exhibits the particular character of the two friends. Two other people are inconsistent in respect to that completely defined friendship.

We should pay attention to the example Whitehead offers here to explain the prospective “sense of penetration” that is arrested and compromised by assumptions about the certainty of knowledge. For Whitehead, friendship is the creative advance in our lives that occurs when two, always unique persons are able to achieve and consolidate a continuing pattern of productive relations. Although the two persons in any continuing friendship are themselves non-substitutable and, to use Whitehead’s own language, anyone else would be “inconsistent” in the relation, for him it is the continuing quality of the process of friendship itself, including both unique friends *and their connectivity*, that is in fact concrete. And the two persons as putative “individuals” or evaluations of their relationship that appeal to fixed characteristics such as obligations are simply abstractions from that lived reality.

Indeed, at a cosmological level for Whitehead, the very assumption that there are such things as discrete individuals is a prime and prominent example of what he calls the “Fallacy of Simple Location”: that is, the familiar and yet fallacious assumption that isolating, decontextualizing, and analyzing things as simple particulars is the best way to understand the content of our experience. Whitehead rejects a world of “objects” as abstractions from our experience, and argues the fundamental realities of both experience and nature itself are best understood as irreducibly extended and dynamic events. For Whitehead, the notion of the discrete individual assumed in much of the liberal theorizing of person is a specific and persistent example of the philosopher’s *deformation professionnelle*, and is a blatant case of what he has called elsewhere the fallacy of “misplaced concreteness.” This second, closely related fallacy regards abstracted entities presumed to have a simple location as being “more real” than the field of their dynamic, extended relations with all of the untidy transitions and conjunctions that constitute the genuine content of the human experience.<sup>11</sup>

Charles Hartshorne elaborates upon this concern of Whitehead’s, problematizing our commonsense understanding of our ostensive “inner” and “outer” domains by insisting on the mutual implication and interpenetration of persons in their relations with others (although our sense of “totality” will have to do the work of Whitehead’s “God”) (1950, 443):

[A]s Whitehead has most clearly seen—individuals generally are not simply outside each other (the fallacy of “simple location”) but in each other, and God’s inclusion of all things is merely the extreme or super-case of the social relativity or mutual immanence of individuals.

And Sor-hoon Tan in her argument that the conduct of human beings is irreducibly social and organic invokes John Dewey’s “retrospective fallacy” as a challenge to the isolating reduplication of personal identity that occurs when we abstract persons from the connectivity of their narratives. Tan avers (2003, 27):

<sup>11</sup> Alfred North Whitehead in *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Donald Sherbourne corrected edition (New York: Free Press, 1979), 137 observes: “This presupposition of individual independence is what I have elsewhere called, the ‘fallacy of simple location.’”

Those still preoccupied with *identity* often complain that Dewey's view is that of a "self-in-action without a self." They miss the point of Dewey's protest against traditional conceptions of the self. For Dewey, there could be no self outside of experience, outside of human doing and undergoing. The distinction between "self" and action is "after the fact." Unity precedes distinctions in experience; to think otherwise is to commit the "retrospective fallacy"—to mistake a distinction introduced into experience by later reflections as fully present in the original experience. . . . Selfhood is an eventual function that emerges with complexly organized interactions, organic and social.

### **Holographic "Focus" as the Functional Equivalent of "Agency"**

Indeed, this "narrative" understanding of persons that precludes a parsing of them as discrete, deracinated individuals provides us with the beginning of an answer to David Wong's question about the kind of agency we have ascribed to Confucian role ethics—what we have called a "focus-field" notion of agency. From Wong's description of the *Analects* as a shared narrative that I cited above, it is clear that there is much in his understanding of early Confucianism that is consistent with our way of thinking about role ethics. And further, Wong seems to be wholly cognizant of the centrality of the aesthetic and aspirational ground of human flourishing and its justification within the Confucian vision of the moral life that we have appealed to in responding to Steve Angle above (Wong 2014, 177):

The Confucian notion of what it is like to live a fully good life has an aesthetic dimension that might look odd and unfamiliar to a contemporary Western audience. . . . Such stylized action could be said to possess a moral beauty. The moral beauty lies in the gracefulness and spontaneity of what has become a natural respectfulness and considerateness.

But Wong in his reading of Confucian ethics still seems to fall back on the primacy of discrete individuals over their relations with others. He frames his question to us thusly: "If I am the sum of my relationships, then who or what is the entity standing in each of these particular relationships?" For Wong, there must be two "entities" (albeit at first biological organisms rather than "persons") before there can be a relationship between them. Wong's own answer to this question, developed in his earlier work and retained in his most recent publications, is: "We begin life embodied as biological organisms and become persons by entering into relationship with others of our kind."<sup>12</sup>

Our answer would be different. We would refrain from the retrospective fallacy by introducing a distinction that was not there in the original experience, and simply repeat the claim that we are the sum of and are constituted by our relationships themselves. I have never been a "me" without the "me" being this son, this brother, this Canadian, and so on. We are our narratives. And there is no need to reduplicate this intense and habitual focus or center of relationships by positing

<sup>12</sup> Wong, "Cultivating the Self in Concert with Others," 192. See also his "Relational and Autonomous Selves," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (December 2004); "If We Are Not by Ourselves, If We Are Not Strangers," *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosemont, Jr.* eds. Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008).

an antecedent “substance” within which these relationships must inhere. William James challenges such “substance” thinking as our “inveterate trick” of turning names into “things” (2000, 42):

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

For Confucian role ethics, behind the fact of the dynamic narrative of relations is nothing. Below we will reflect on how we begin life as initially shallow, complex matrixes of first largely physical and then familial and communal relations, and through achieving focus and resolution in living these embodied roles and relations, gradually evolve into always unique and somewhat coherent personal identities.

### **Holographic “Field” as a Necessary Corollary to a Doctrine of Internal Relations**

In order to be clear in formulating our own answer to Wong’s question, we will need to go back to the distinction between contrasting doctrines of external and internal relations alluded to by Angus Graham above. Substance ontology and its doctrine of external relations has become and continues to be our shared (but culturally bound) commonsense. This ontology guarantees the primacy and the integrity of the discrete and independent entities Wong seems to assume when he allows that we as separate organisms “become persons by entering into relationship with others of our kind.”

A doctrine of internal relations by contrast begins from the primacy of the organic continuity that is constitutive of putative “things.” Given the primacy of this vital relationality in the cosmology that gives context to Confucian role ethics, both embodied biological relations and social relations as they are captured in the cognate, aspectual terms *ti* 體 and *li* 禮 —“lived body” and “embodied living”—are organically diffused as those dynamic, interactive, and interpenetrating patterns that make up the narratives of lives being lived.<sup>13</sup> Such patterns are initially so weak and tentative that we might be inclined to describe infants as “biological organisms,” but this is to abstract them from their contexts. They are from the outset nested in and informed by the field of familial and communal relations within which they evolve, and as these patterns are marked by continuing growth and depth in meaning, they enable infants to become increasingly distinctive as

<sup>13</sup> See Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong and Honolulu: Chinese University Press and University of Hawai’i Press, 2011). In chapter 3 I use these two terms *ti* 體 and *li* 禮 as a heuristic for explaining the process of achieving personal identity in the early Confucian tradition.

they learn to live well.

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

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

### **“Focus” as Intensive Resolution**

We have thus far developed a more nuanced understanding of what the extended “field” might mean in a “focus-field” notion of human agency, and have tried to reconceive the notion of inner life and outer world as being holographic and interpenetrating. Let’s now turn to a closer reflection on what the process of “focusing” this field entails, and how such language might be useful in expressing a more complex yet perhaps more empirically coherent conception of agency and personal identity. In so doing, we are again responding specifically to David Wong’s request for further clarification. Wong (191) finds it unproblematic to say that “fields take on definition through individuals and their relationships and in that sense are constituted by them.” But at the same time he worries that “it is more difficult to say how a field constitutes individuals.” We might restate Wong’s concern more concretely as saying that it is easier to see how a family takes on its definition by virtue of the members who constitute it, than it is to say how the family lineage comes to constitute each of its members. Or it is easier to see how history is constituted by its events than it is to see how each event has implicated within it the entire course of history. What we are trying to do here with our notion of focus-field agency is to address precisely this difficulty.

Indeed, within this relational cosmology, we might want to think of persons as narrative events within a continuous history who achieve their identities transactionally and interdependently over time rather than as being something fixed, given, and independent at the outset. Still, even as the unbounded totality is

present not only in each one of us, but in each moment of our experience, what is central for us in shaping the characteristic conduct that forms our unique identities is what actually becomes focal. We might want to think of our focal identity as the clines or gradients of what becomes most immediately significant for each of us as we bring our matrix of relationships into meaningful resolution. And again for most of us, what is focal and thus has such privilege is our “embodied living” (*li* 禮) within the continuing narrative of those roles lived in our families and communities that begins from the “living body” (*ti* 體) we inherit from our family lineage.

The first and immensely significant factor, then, that we must consider in the process of focusing a persisting, personal identity and its coherent horizons of relevance is “lived body” (*ti* 體)—the extent to which the structure of our understanding and our habitude is “rooted” (*ti* 體) in and shaped by the fact of our embodied experience in its visceral connection to the world. Given the correlative relationship between “mind” and “body” in this cosmology, it should not be surprising that Deborah Sommer in summarizing her analysis of the uses of the *ti* body in the classical literature uses language immediately reminiscent of the holographic “heartminding” (*xin*) we have found above in the *Mencius* where the totality is implicated in the connectivity of each unique person. Sommer concludes that the *ti* body is (2008, 294)

. . . a polysemous corpus of indeterminate extent that can be partitioned into subtler units, each of which is often analogous to the whole and shares a fundamental consubstantiality and common identity with the whole. . . . When a *ti* body is fragmented into parts (literally or conceptually), each part retains in certain aspects, a kind of wholeness or becomes a simulacra of the larger entity of which it is a constituent.<sup>14</sup>

In our earlier work, we have joined scholars such as Marcel Granet, Joseph Needham, and Angus Graham in trying to understand and explain the prominence of analogical thinking as it functions within this early cosmology. Nowhere is this correlative thinking more apparent than in the way in which the fact of associated living produces the collateral categories that define our always transactional physical experience as living organisms shaping and being shaped by our various environments. From the beginning, our relationality can be described in terms of coming and going, giving and taking, rising and falling, closing and opening, and so on. Mark Johnson has done much to argue for the bodily basis of human meaning formation and, following John Dewey, for the aesthetic ground of human flourishing. Johnson maps the way in which the barest of physical image-schemata are extended through the metaphorical projections and elaborations of our imagination to generate complex cognitive and affective patterns of meaning (1987,

<sup>14</sup> Whereas the metaphor we associate with “body” in European languages seems to be a “container” image, the meaning in the earliest classical Chinese sources is the organic (rather than geometric) form of animal and plant bodies, where in certain contexts it has a horticultural reference as plant vegetation (roots, stalks, foliage) in general, and more specifically, as a rhizome or tuber.

124).<sup>15</sup>

Our world radiates out from our bodies as perceptual centers from which we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell our world.

For Johnson, the formal, logical structures of human understanding and the human capacity to produce complex culture are a direct extension of our lived bodies that is accomplished through the exercise of the imagination (137):

I urged the view that understanding is never merely a matter of holding beliefs, either consciously or unconsciously. More basically, one's understanding is one's way of being in, or having, a world. This is very much a matter of one's embodiment, that is, of perceptual mechanisms, patterns of discrimination, motor programs, and various bodily skills. And it is equally a matter of our embeddedness within culture, language, institutions, and historical traditions.

To give only one example, it is not difficult to conceive of how recurrent, habituated physical patterns such as giving and getting, rising and falling, can be extended, transformed, and metaphorically projected to constitute the higher order economic concepts and values defining a mature culture.

In all of the early Confucian writings, the theme most persistent and pervasive in shaping the Chinese philosophical tradition broadly is the project of finding our proper “way” in the world—literally, our *dao* 道—through a regimen of personal cultivation in our roles and relations. Our physical abilities of walking and seeing are literally captured with the human eye and foot as depicted in the earliest forms of this character as found on the bronzes: 攴. We can see in the linked polysemy of this term *dao*—“way-making> showing the way> pathway> speaking> explaining> method”—how meaning is extended from our physical to our more complex cognitive experience. Our human potential is not a given, but rather emerges as a function of the circumstances of our lives that begin from our embeddedness and our bodily experience.

In moving from “lived body” (*ti*) to its cognate “embodied living” (*li*), we might return to the Mencian “heartminding” (*xin*) and the coordination of its *qi* 氣 as a metonym for achieving focus and resolution in the unfolding of a person's life story. Because *li* as achieved propriety in one's roles and relations entails growth in these relationships, the proper existential coordination and focusing of this vitality brings with it a profoundly moral as well as a psycho-physiological aspect. Mencius himself offers advice on the attainment of excellence in one's conduct, understanding the field of *qi* as he does in terms of specifically moral energy. He speaks first of his own capacity for effective communication and then

<sup>15</sup> While Johnson identifies his basic image-schemata as “containment,” “force,” “balance,” “cycles,” “scales,” “links,” and “center-periphery,” consistent with the primacy of vital relationality in the classical Chinese cosmology, we would be inclined to read these basic images in fundamentally relational terms that describe the always transactional relationship between organism and environment.

of his consequent ability to nourish his “flood-like *qi*” (*haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣), describing this nourished *qi* in a focus-field language as that which has become at once “most firm” (*zhigang* 至剛) and “most vast” (*zhida* 至大):

Mencius 2A2: 孟子曰：“。。我四十不動心。”子。。

[公孫丑問]曰：“不動心有道乎？”。。“敢問夫子惡乎長？”

曰：“我知言，我善養吾浩然之氣。”

“敢問何謂浩然之氣？”

曰：“難言也。其為氣也，至大至剛，以直養而無害，則塞于天地之間。

其為氣也，配義與道；無是，餒也。是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。”

Mencius said: “. . . By the age of forty I was no longer perturbed in my heartminding.” . . .

Gong-sun Chou asked: “Is there some way that one becomes unperturbed in one’s heartminding? . . . May I dare to ask after your success in this respect?”

“I understand discourse, and I am adept at nourishing my flood-like *qi*.” replied Mencius

“May I ask what you mean by ‘flood-like *qi*?’”

Mencius replied: “It is difficult to express. It is the most extensive and the most intensive quality of *qi*. If one nurtures it faithfully and without respite, it will fill up all between the heavens and the earth. As a quality of *qi*, it is of a piece with achieving optimal appropriateness in one’s conduct (*yi* 義) and with walking the proper way (*dao* 道). Without it, one lacks proper nourishment. It is what is born of a cumulative habit of optimally appropriate conduct, and is not something that can be had merely through random acts of appropriateness.”

Restated in the cosmological language of focus and field, Mencius takes as the ground of personal cultivation his ability to communicate with others effectively in the broadest sense, resulting as it does in a deepening of meaningful relationships. This discursive ability to produce meaning in his relationships enables him to nurture and cultivate his “flood-like *qi*,” and thereby achieve the most “intensive” focus (至剛 most firm) and the most “extensive” magnitude (至大 most vast) in his continuum of relations with his environs, both near and far. Using Mencius’s own language, by nourishing his *qi* he is able to bring the greatest degree of meaningful resolution (*yi* 義) to his close relationships with others in his family and community, and this enhanced focus at the same time gives him reach and influence within the most extensive field of *qi*—that is, experience most broadly construed as *dao* 道. In this manner, sustained virtuosity (*daode* 道德) in his conduct is manifested through acquiring the greatest degree of potency and effectiveness (*de* 德) in relation to the most far-ranging elements of his environments (*dao* 道).

We could use the familiar language of *jingshen* 精神 to capture this same dynamic between the intensity of focus and the enhanced extension of one’s field. *Jing* 精, far from being essence as opposed to attribute, is the concentrated source of personal vitality, both physical and intellectual—the sap of life, a tangible life-giving energy—that is both inherited from parents and acquired as derived from

various forms of nourishment. And *shen* 神 is not the spiritual as opposed to the corporeal, but is this *jing* vitality as it comes to flow and be manifested through the functional activities of mind and body as a whole—*shen* is extended, manifested life.

### **One is the Many, the Many One**

As we have seen above, whatever a person—a putative “individual”—is or is not, it cannot be the separate and spatially isolated thing our imagination takes it to be without any reference to past and to present relations. Persons are not present at birth, but are emergent in the relations that constitute them from this initial stage, where they become self-conscious through communicating in the families and communities in which they live. It is not “I think therefore I am,” but “in communicating I am becoming.” This always collaborative, discursive process of becoming a person is why the language of roles is so powerful in expressing what is indeed a more robust, narrative notion of agency. The agency and actions of a son are not the conduct of a discrete person; rather, implicated in that activity is not only the parenting of his parents but the living on of distinctive physical, cultural, and ethical qualities of the remotest of progenitorial and cultural ancestors.

The contemporary philosopher Tang Junyi 唐君毅 provides language for another perspective on how to conceive of this focus-field dynamic in which we are able to optimize the relationship between the human and *tian* through sagacious conduct. He suggests that *yiduo bufen guan* 一多不分觀, an expression that can be read in several different ways, is a generic feature of the Chinese processual cosmology. It is at once a postulate of the inseparability of the one and the many, of uniqueness and multivalence, of continuity and multiplicity, of integrity and integration, of the inner life and the outer world (Tang 1991: vol. 11, 16-17). Importantly, this notion of intrinsic, constitutive relationality—the assumption that the constitution of any “one” entails “the many”—is a characteristic of Chinese natural cosmology fundamental to our understanding of the relationally constituted person; again, the many are all here in me.

Cosmologically, this proposition of the inseparability of the one and the many asserts not only that any phenomenon in our field of experience has implicated within it the unbounded many, but further that as a unique “one” it can be focused in many different ways according to the multiplicity of roles that come to be defining of it. This woman is this father’s daughter, this child’s mother, this husband’s lover, this political candidate’s American, and so on. On the one hand she is a unique and persistent particular that becomes increasingly influential to the extent that she is able to bring resolution and meaning to the pattern of specific roles she lives. And on the other hand, she has the entire cosmos and all that is happening implicated within her own intensive and extensive patterns of relationships. The consummatory goal for this unique individual in cultivating these many relationships is to optimize their possibilities—to make the very most of the opportunities that her circumstances allow.

The meaning of this woman’s family, for example, is not predetermined, but is negotiated out of the continuing needs and contributions of the members that

belong to it, and is disclosed in the quality of meaningful relations they are able to achieve. And each of the individual members of the family from their own unique perspective expresses the full complement of all of the family members in what they do. Given that harmony is an invariably negotiated, emergent, and provisional order contingent upon those many elements that constitute it, it is neither rigidly linear nor teleologically disciplined toward some given end.

### **A Summary Account of Focus-Field Agency**

The middle chapters of the *Analects* are hugely important philosophically for role ethics in providing anecdotes in the exemplary life of the teacher, Confucius, that animate him for his immediate protégées and for the innumerable generations that follow them. Confucius as a person is described as having four abstentions that are all clearly directed against any reduction of the human experience to a moral catechism, with the observance of each of them requiring the full entertainment of the contextualizing circumstances.

子絕四：毋意，毋必，毋固，毋我。

There were four things the Master abstained from entirely: He would not conjecture, he did not claim or demand certainty, he was not inflexible, and he was not self-absorbed. (*Analects* 9.4)

On the model of these habits of action attributed to Confucius we might ask: What are some defining features of this focus-field conception of agency serving as ground for role ethics?

With respect to Confucius’s refraining from conjecture, this understanding of agency has the virtue of being wholly naturalistic in that it makes no appeal to a metaphysics of self or to any unifying substratum such as soul or mind or nature or character. Such agency is best described as more of a centered and concentrated vitality than any simple, isolatable, and superordinate unity. It is this sense of growth in achieved personal uniqueness and one’s intimate continuity with the totality through family and community relations that provides a direct line from the self-conscious deference, veneration, and gratitude of the moral life to the spirituality we associate with natural piety and an increasingly religious sensitivity. Confucius answers Fan Chi’s question about the nature of wisdom:

To devote yourself to what is appropriate (*yi*) for the people, and to show respect for the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance can be called wisdom. (*Analects* 6.22)

While this passage has persuaded some commentators that Confucius’s reticence to seek intimacy with the spiritual world is a clear indication of his advocacy of a secular humanism, an alternative, perhaps better reading might be that for Confucius, real religiousness is to be found much nearer to home.

Another generalization that Tang Junyi makes about early Chinese cosmology that captures this religious sense of felt worth and cosmic belonging is expressed as *xing ji tiandao guan* 性即天道觀—“the postulate that human

natural tendencies are nothing other than the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves.” This acknowledges the fact that agents are radically embedded, and can only be understood by moving from field to focus, from the totality to the particular, from the most remote to the most relevant, thereby taking into account the full compass of their contextualizing relations. Agents are thus an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuosity (*ren* 仁) within their inherited natural and cultural legacy (*tian dao* 天道)—as a particular focus within the unbounded field of experience.

A reluctance to claim or demand certainty begins from the fact that the notion of “growing and living” (*sheng* 生) within one’s contextualizing relations as a defining feature of agency requires moral imagination. Agency is first and foremost a directed striving and a “doing” as an expression of this life and growth that expresses preference within a continuing personal narrative. As a producer of enhanced meaning, this narrative brings with it aspiration, frustration, and sometimes, even satisfaction. Irreducibly complex persons are vital and inherently active, and in one’s continuing collaboration with others, one’s actions must always remain provisional, revisionist, and emergent rather than seeking any finality or closure.

Flexibility is required from reflexive persons who acknowledge a continuity between themselves as foci and their contextualizing fields. Such agents have to be understood as irreducibly transactional, shaping and being shaped in their patterns of relations. At the end of the day, such agency is negotiated; while it is passive in the archaic sense of invariably suffering the actions of others, it must be described otherwise in that it is, at the same time, animated, purposeful, and projective.

And agency that is irreducibly social cannot afford to be self-absorbed. Such agents become increasingly enculturated through the semiotic processes and symbolic competencies that come to shape them in their associations, and develop their own inflected and reflexive sense of themselves out of their intersubjective relations with others. Such hylozoistic agents—at once psychic and physical—are always embodied and embodying as a porous membrane that strives to achieve meaning and coherence in the changing configuration of the organic physical and social relations that constitute them. Such agents not only have the capacity to be responsive to their environments, but are further characterized by a cultivated degree of freedom and creativity to be self-defining and self-aware through full participation in the situations and events of their lives.

### **“Potentiality” and “Causality” in the Focus-Field Conception of Person**

In summary, we might want to clarify the notion of “potential” to underscore the inseparability of person and context in this Confucian conception of relationally-constituted, focus-field persons. The “potential” for becoming human is not simply the first inklings, something inborn “within” the person exclusive of family relations. In the first place, there is no such person. Since persons are constituted by their relations, the “potential” of a person in fact emerges *pari passu* from out of the specific, contingent transactions that, in the fullness of time, eventuate in this particular person in this particular family. Thus, the best sense we can make

of “potential” here is that rather than being ready-made, it evolves with the ever changing circumstances; rather than being generic or universal, it is always unique to the career of the relational person; and rather than existing as an inherent and defining endowment, it can only be known post hoc after the unfolding of the particular narrative.<sup>16</sup> The argument, then, is that the preponderance of the content of “human nature” (*renxing* 人性) is acquired rather than given as it is expressed in the habitude of “consummatory conduct” (*ren* 仁), “acting optimally appropriate in meaningful relations” (*yi* 義), “realizing propriety in these roles and relations” (*li* 禮), and “acting with intelligence and wisdom” (*zhi* 智). “Natural tendencies” (*xing* 性) are no more an essential and inborn given than is “consummatory conduct” (*ren* 仁). Both are a source and a product: that is, the articulation of tentative native conditions in the robust consequences of habituation. “Acting with wisdom” is not applying wisdom to a situation, but a condition of acting that arises with the efficacy of one’s actions.

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

<sup>16</sup> For Dewey too “potentialities cannot be known till after the interactions have occurred. There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted.” Lincoln is not Lincoln independent of the circumstances of history, nor are the circumstances of history the making of Lincoln. Indeed, Lincoln is a collaboration between person and circumstances expressed as thick habits of conduct. “The idea that potentialities are inherent and fixed by relation to a predetermined end was a product of a highly restricted state of technology.” See *The Essential Dewey*, eds. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1: 223-24.

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