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Taking Confucian religiousness on its own terms

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the persistent misinterpretation of Confucianism in Western academic circles, proposing a perspective shift towards an internal understanding of Confucian religiosity. Through a comprehensive discourse on Confucianism, the study illuminates its philosophical lexicon, challenging the reductionist view that often casts its complex ethos as mere mysticism. By closely examining the classical Chinese texts, the study reveals the dynamic semantic richness inherent in Confucian thought. It interrogates the West's oversimplification of these teachings and advocates for a nuanced appreciation of Confucianism's integral role in shaping cultural and philosophical paradigms. This research serves as a critical bridge between disparate cultural interpretations, paving the way for a more informed engagement with Confucianism's profound doctrinal substance.

KEY-WORDS: Confucianism; Western Interpretation; Philosophical Paradigms Classical Chinese Texts

RESUMO: Este artigo explora a persistente má interpretação do confucionismo em círculos acadêmicos ocidentais, propondo uma mudança de perspectiva para uma compreensão interna da religiosidade confucionista. Por meio de um discurso abrangente sobre o confucionismo, o estudo esclarece seu léxico filosófico, desafiando a visão reducionista que frequentemente retrata seu complexo *ethos* como mero misticismo. Ao examinar minuciosamente os textos clássicos chineses, o estudo revela a rica semântica dinâmica inerente ao pensamento confucionista. Ele questiona a simplificação excessiva desses ensinamentos pelo Ocidente e defende uma apreciação matizada do papel integral do confucionismo na formação de paradigmas culturais e filosóficos. Esta pesquisa atua como uma ponte crítica entre interpretações culturais distintas, abrindo caminho para um engajamento mais informado com a substância doutrinária profunda do confucionismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Confucionismo; Interpretação Ocidental; Paradigmas Filosóficos; Textos Clássicos Chineses.

The problem

In the process of Confucianism being introduced into the Western academy, the key philosophical vocabulary and the terms of art of Confucian religiousness have been overwritten with the values of an Abrahamic religiousness not its own. Indeed, Confucianism in the eyes of many has been reduced to a necessarily anemic, second-rate form of Christianity. Witness the standard formula of translations: *tian* 天 is "Heaven," *li* 禮 is "ritual," *yi* 義 is "righteousness," *dao* 道 is "*the* Way," *ren* 仁 is "benevolence," *de* 德 is "virtue," *xiao* 孝 is "filial piety," and so on. In sum, such a vocabulary conjures forth a pre-established, single-ordered and divinely sanctioned cosmos guided by the hand of a righteous God that ought to inspire human faith and compliance.

There have been subsequent efforts by some scholars to rescue an uprooted and transplanted Confucianism from this Christian soil. But the result has often been to reconstruct its ideas and values through the prism of an Orientalism that would ostensibly save the integrity of Confucianism by dismissing its profoundly religious dimensions, and in so doing, reduce it to a kind of secular humanism. Or perhaps worse, in reading Confucianism's inclusive and provisional approach to philosophical understanding as unstructured and indeterminate, such interpreters are given to reducing its holistic sensibilities to mysticism and the occult.

The consequence, then, of this overtly Christianized and then Orientalized reading of the Confucian vocabulary has located the study of this tradition within Western seats of higher learning in religion and area studies departments rather than as a proper part of the philosophy curriculum, and has relegated translations of the Confucian texts to the "New Age" and suspect "Eastern Religions" corners of our bookstores.

In attempting to provide a more nuanced explanation of these same Confucian terms, Qian Mu is adamant that this vocabulary expressing the unique and complex Confucianism vision of a consummate life simply has no counterpart in other languages (Dennerline, 1988, p. 9). Qian Mu's point in making this claim is not to argue for cultural purism and incommensurability; on the contrary, he would allow that with sufficient exposition the Confucian world can be "appreciated" in important degree by those from without. Qian Mu's claim is on behalf of the uniqueness and the value of a tradition that has defined its terms of art through the lived experience of its people over millennia, and anticipates the real difficulty we must face in attempting to capture its complex and organically related vocabulary in other languages without substantial qualification and explanation.

Getting past transcendence

Some of the most prominent voices of Western sinology—Marcel Granet, Frederick Mote, Joseph Needham, Angus Graham, and K. C. Chang—share in common the belief that there is a distinctive yet always-evolving way of thinking that needs to be taken into account in understanding a holistic Chinese cosmology. Further, they assert that this dynamic Chinese cosmology posits a world that is naturalistic, autogenerative, and self-construing without appeal to some external metaphysical principle as its unilateral source of order.[1]

We might take Marcel Granet, the earliest sinologist to give clear voice to this position, as an example. In identifying and articulating the conditions of this early Chinese cosmology, Granet insists that there is "no world of transcendent principles outside the human realm." (Granet, 1934, p. 279). If classical Chinese cosmogonies do not take us back to

[1] See a summary of their ideas in Puett (2002).

some transcendent source of design, where then does meaning come from? It is the answer to this question that establishes a direct line between the distinctive Confucian role ethics and a Confucian human-centered religiousness.

A generation ago Herbert Fingarette chose the title *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* for a small book that came to have an enormous impact on the understanding of Confucian philosophy within the Western academy. In this monograph and other seminal papers that followed from it, Fingarette (1972) argues forcefully that in the Confucian world the "ritualization" and refinement of the roles and relationships that structure family and community enchant the human experience, and stand as the ultimate source of what is sacred. I have argued elsewhere that one way of conceiving the Confucian relationally constituted person is to appeal to the cognate terms, "embodying" (*ti* 體) and "achieving propriety in one's roles and relations" (*li* 禮), as the progression through which we become human. It can be fairly argued that it is this same notion of *li* that can be used to bring Confucian religiosity into clearer focus.

It is often remarked that "religion" as a term might be derived from the Latin *religare* meaning "to bind tightly." One can see how *li* as a family and communal grammar locating persons in their proper place relative to each other would bind them together, thereby strengthening the fabric of society and encouraging a robust sense of shared meaning and belonging. Although within the Confucian context, *li* has not been broadly institutionalized as a formal "religion" per se, it still functions to foster a religious quality in the human experience in fortifying our family and communal bonds. A powerful argument has been made by philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, and most recently, Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, that real religiousness, free from the sometimes suffocating uniformities enforced by formal religious institutions, can only be achieved by giving full expression to our own personal uniqueness, a process that in fact allows for the open informality

and the distinctive personalization that are the defining features of *li*.[2]

Character *zong* 宗 (ancestors): Oracle bones, Bronze, Seals, Traditional scripts

The family ground of *li* allows for an immediate extension from "family" (*jia* 家) to "ancestor, ancestral temple, clan" (*zong* 宗), a character that occurs in the oracle bones and that is explained by philologists as "the temple in which the ancestral tablets are displayed." This association accounts for the pre-modern Japanese coinage of the term for "religion" as *shūkyō* 宗教 (Ch. *zongjiao*), literally "the teachings of the ancestral temple and extended family" in which this family locus of religiousness is its primary reference.[3]

Li is defined in the *Shuowen* lexicon paronomastically—that is, by phonetic and semantic association—as *lü* 履 meaning "treading a path," and hence the continuing narrative of one's conduct or behavior. *Li* has been conventionally translated as "ritual," "rites," "customs," "etiquette," "propriety," "morals," "rules of proper behavior," "achieved propriety in ritualized roles and relations," and "reverence." Properly contextualized, each of these English terms can render *li* on occasion. In classical

[2] See Dewey (1998), pp. 401–410, "Religion versus the Religious", and Emerson (2003) "The Divinity School Address" for a perceived antagonism between real religious feelings and the institutions of structured religions. More recently, Gianni Vattimo in his *After Christianity* (2002), and Richard Rorty (1999) in essays such as "Religion as a Conversation-stopper," both individually and again together in a Rorty and Vattimo conversation, *The Future of Religion* (2005), have taken the regimentation of institutionalized, clerical religion as the target of their sustained critique.

[3] See Liu (1995), pp. 299–301.

Chinese, however, the character carries *all* of these meanings, albeit with differing degrees of emphasis, on every occasion of its use. The compound character *li* 禮 is an ideograph connoting the presentation (*shi* 示) of sacrifices to the primarily ancestral spirits at an altar to them (*li* 豊), suggesting the profoundly religious significance that this term entails.

Parsed in its narrower but both formal and informal senses, *li* is how personally to serve the family and communal spirits, both living and dead, to bring about a thriving family and community, with its emphasis being clearly upon human flourishing in this world rather than in the next. This understanding of *li* as being processional, eventful, and family- and community-centered is a signature of classical Confucian religiousness in which the focus is on reverence for the continuity of one's lineage expressed through sincere family feeling and concern (*xiao* 孝). In its ceremonial form, it is the celebration of people who are now dead rather than any preoccupation with the "worship" of dead people. As Confucius says, "To devote yourself to what is appropriate for the people, and to show respect for the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance can be called wisdom."[4] One possible interpretation of this passage would suggest the Confucian philosophy is a kind of secular humanism that resists more elevated religious practices. A better reading I believe would allow that for Confucius, spirituality like most values arises in striving to do what is optimally appropriate for others within family and community, and that formal religious functions are properly instrumental in reinforcing this end. Confucius seems to be making this same point when he responds to his student, Zilu, explaining that the appropriate site for cultivating and expressing our religious feelings is the living world of family and friends:

[4] *Analects* 6.22: 子曰："務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。"

> Zilu asked how to serve the spirits and the gods. The Master replied, "Not yet being able to serve other people, how would you be able to serve the spirits?" He said, "May I ask about death?" The Master replied, "Not yet understanding life, how could you understand death?"[5]

We have chosen to translate *li* in its broadest compass as "striving for propriety in one's roles and relations." Again, this rendering is a considered choice. On the formal side, *li* are those meaning-invested roles, relationships, and institutions that facilitate communication, and foster a sense of community. Most formal and conventionalized conduct that makes social living in our specific roles and relations meaningful constitutes *li*, including table manners, patterns of greeting and leave-taking, graduations, weddings, funerals, gestures of deference, ancestral sacrifices, and so on. *Li* are a social syntax that at any one time provides each member with a defined place and status within the family, community, and polity. Just as grammar as a felicitous arrangement of words functions to produce semantic meaning, so *li* as the attentive coordination of roles and relations conduces to the attainment of social meaning. *Li* are a hermeneutics of life-forms transmitted from generation to generation as repositories of emerging and compounding meaning, enabling individuals to appropriate persisting values and to make these values appropriate to their own, always unique, situations. While we perform the *li* in the present, much of their efficacy stems from their being a link to the past and thereby, to the future as well.

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[5] *Analects* 11.12: 季路問事鬼神。子曰："未能事人，焉能事鬼？"敢問死。曰："未知生，焉知死？" David Keightley (1990) in his reflections on the meaning and value of death in classical China broadly, allows that death was perceived as "unproblematic." Of course, he is not claiming that the end of life was not approached with some trepidation. He means rather that death was not considered unnatural, perverse, or horrible. Chinese "natural" death as integral to the cycle of life is contrasted with the enormity of death in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where mortality is conceived as divine punishment meted out for human hubris and disobedience. While there is an uneasiness manifested in visions of the "Yellow Springs," a name for the netherworld, there is a marked absence of the morbidity and gloom that we associate with the Greek, Roman, and medieval European conceptions of death. See also Ames (1998).

Li is nothing less than "discourse" in its broadest sense where, in its most refined and religious applications, it can be the source of a communal poetry and a cosmic musicality that is so movingly expressed in the latter books of the *Zhongyong*. In the discursive community, meaning emerges out of the relational virtuosity made possible by effective communication in all of its forms. Given the speciousness of any "literal" metanarrative that would promise to give us access to some foundational truth, all we have is discourse as a currency for productively renegotiating situations as they arise—what Richard Rorty calls our possibility to generate infinite "redescriptions" (or perhaps better in the Confucian case, "re*pre*scriptions")—so that the conversation might continue (Rorty, 1989, pp. 169ff). Indeed, language becomes poetry in which the text emerges in its full autonomy as what the world really is. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, "Here language just stands for itself, it brings itself to stand before us."[6] What Gadamer means, I think, is that language commands a world into being, and cannot be treated instrumentally and reductively as mere representation of some given reality. Poetic language is presentational more than representational, is inciteful (and sometimes "insightful") more than referential, is perlocutionary and inspiring more than descriptive. It is in the poetry and in the song occasioned by *li* that we most immediately and dramatically experience the collaboration between human feeling and its contextualizing horizons as together we create our world.

Using the Confucian vocabulary itself to reiterate this opportunity for shared communicative growth, Confucius regularly contrasts his notion of socially and politically constituted "exemplary persons" (*junzi* 君子) with those who fail to cultivate the roles and relationships that locate them in community—what he calls "small or petty persons" (*xiaoren* 小人). Not only do such "small persons" contribute little to the flourishing of their worlds, but further, their

[6] Cited from Steele (2002) *Genius in Their Own Words* (2002), p. 217.

failure to develop the sense of shame and belonging that makes them responsive to others, and thus responsible members of community, can constitute a very real threat to social order.

Indeed, Vrinda Dalmiya makes a case that "'not doings' can be as violent as some doings." (Dalmiya, 1998, p. 523). The magnitude of this violence is underscored in Hannah Arendt's rather thin description of Adolf Eichmann as having been "thoughtless" and "banal" rather than evil, a seemingly mild indictment for a genocidal monster. But Arendt's point is that Eichmann's "carelessness"—the tyranny of a shameless individual who "couldn't care less"—emerges from the empowerment of the actions of a morally sterile person who perpetrates a maelstrom of violence that arises in the absence of thinking and feeling. In a Confucian world, there is a very real sense in which the disintegrative conduct of rude, thoughtless, and shameless persons is the ultimate source of immorality.

On the informal and uniquely personal side, full participation in a ritually constituted community requires the personalization of prevailing customs, institutions, and values. What makes ritually constituted order profoundly different from law or rule is this hermeneutical process of participating, confirming, and ultimately, reauthorizing the tradition as one's own. Ritual propriety, like most things Confucian, begins at home, and through radial patterns of deference, becomes cosmic in its reach. The performance of *li,* thus understood, sediments into the human community, defining the appropriate relationships between the present population and its forbearers, and the proper relationships between those who would exercise social and political authority and those who are governed by it.

Confucian Religiousness: The Flower of Inspired Living

Elsewhere I have argued that classical Confucianism is at once non-theistic, and profoundly religious.[7] It is a religious tradition certainly with "ghosts and spirits" in the sense of ancestors and cultural heroes and who knows what else, but without a God; it is a religious sensibility that affirms a shared spirituality that emerges out of the inspired human experience itself. There is no parish (except for the extended family), no altars (except for perhaps the dining room table), and no clergy (except for those exemplary models deferred to as the living center of one's family and community). Confucianism celebrates the way in which the process of human growth and extension is shaped by, and contributes to, the meaning of the totality—a notion of *creatio in situ* that stands in stark contrast to *creatio ex nihilo* traditions.[8]

We have encountered the *Zhongyong* or *Focusing the Familiar* earlier. It is a short yet seminal text that from Han dynasty times had a prominence as both a chapter in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) and as an independently circulating text—a stature that was much magnified from the thirteenth century onward when, as one of the *Four Books* designated by Zhu Xi, it would have been known by heart certainly by every aspirant to civil office and by most Chinese intellectuals as well. It is because the *Zhongyong* is among the *Four Books* the most powerful statement of Confucian religiousness that Zhu Xi singles it out as the highest expression of the Confucian project.

In many ways the *Zhongyong* is an object lesson in the aggregating radial expression of Confucian religiousness that begins

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[7] See Ames (2003). A more sustained argument for the profundity and legitimacy of this use of religiousness is found in Henry Rosemont, Jr.'s *Rationality and Religious Experience* (2002).

[8] Tu Wei-ming (1985) develops this contrast between *creatio ex nihilo* and the continuous creativity of the Confucian world as it is directed by an "anthropocosmic vision."

modestly with personal cultivation and culminates in a cosmic transformation. Following Zhu Xi in taking the *Zhongyong* as a linear and coherent document, we might observe that the cadence of this text in the early sections moves rather listlessly with an expressed concern over the continuing failure of human beings to forge their way effectively in the world. Indeed, an exasperated Confucius laments that, "Alas, this proper way is not being traveled at all!"[9] But once under way, the *Zhongyong* gradually gathers speed, celebrating both our human capacity and our ultimate responsibility to step up as co-creators with the heavens and the earth in shaping the emergent order of the cosmos. As the text continues, the pace quickens dramatically, declaring that by participating fully in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth "human beings can take their places as members of this triad,"[10] and in so doing, "can become the complement of *tian*."[11] With a final burst of energy, then, the *Zhongyong* hastens toward its crescendo —its own "Ode to Joy"—in which it quite literally breaks into song, rejoicing in the capacity of consummatory human beings to create meaning and to realize their world.

In the Chinese cosmology expressed in the *Zhongyong*, the lived world is the bottomless unfolding of an always-provisional world order according to the rhythm of its own internal creative processes without any fixed pattern or guiding hand. And in the absence of any creator "God," this Confucian cosmology lifts the bar rather significantly with respect to the degree of creativity expected from the human collaborator. A meaningful world can only be achieved through concerted human effort.

There are several profound differences between this Confucian religiousness and those Abrahamic traditions that have largely defined

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[9] *Zhongyong* 5: 子曰："道其不行矣夫。"

[10] *Zhongyong* 22: 可以與天地參矣。

[11] *Zhongyong* 31: 故曰配天。

the meaning of religion in the Anglo-European cultural narratives and beyond. I would argue that, unlike the "worship" model that defers to the ultimate meaning of some temporally prior, independent, external agency—what F. D. E. Schleiermacher has called religions of "absolute dependence"—Confucian religious experience is itself a *product* of the flourishing community where the quality of the religious life is a direct consequence of the quality of communal living. And the sacred in Confucianism is not only the root of the flourishing community as it is inherited from past generations, not only the foundation on which the culture is built, but it is also the ongoing achieved quality of inspired living—the blossom and the fruit of human flourishing. It is a human-centered, rather than a God-centered, religiousness that emerges through conscientious attention to refining the human experience through achieved propriety in our roles and relations.

A second way in which Confucian religiousness is distinct from the Abrahamic traditions is that Confucian religiousness is neither salvific nor eschatological. While it does entail a kind of conversion, it is specifically a transformation of the quality of human life in the ordinary business of the day that not only elevates and inspires our daily transactions, but further extends outward radially from the family and community to enchant the world. The cosmos is wider and deeper and richer when human foraging is elevated to *haute cuisine*, when stick markings are disciplined into fine calligraphy and breathtaking bronze designs, when coarse gestures are refined to become the sober cadence of ceremony and the exhilaration of the dance, when grunting interventions are amplified into a sublime and haunting melody, when the heat of random copulation becomes the constant and reassuring warmth of hearth and family. It is this transformation—the ordinary and everyday made elegant—that seems at least in part to provide the mystery other expressions of religious feeling find in some transcendent, supernatural appeal.

There are surely those who would regard a Confucian human-

centered religiousness that makes no appeal to a transcendent deity as a much-impoverished sense of religion. They might remain unconvinced that such an alternative human-centered and naturalistic religious sensibility is sufficiently robust to be legitimately labeled "religious" in the first place, lowering the bar so dramatically that it might be better described as a kind of secular humanism. They might dispute my claim that the centrality of the religious aspect of Confucian philosophy with its focus on ritualized living is a viable "a-theistic" religiousness that warrants a vocabulary importantly different from that of theism.

But a Confucian response to such incredulity might join John Dewey in his critique on more conventional, institutionalized religion, suggesting that a transcendental appeal offers little respite or real relief to the vicissitudes of the human experience:

> Were it a thousand times dialectically demonstrated that life as a whole is regulated by a transcendent principle to a final inclusive goal, nonetheless truth and error, health and disease, good and evil, hope and fear in the concrete, would remain just what and where they are now.[12]

Dewey is asserting here that claims about a transcendent source do not make any real difference to the world we actually experience. But perhaps he is not going far enough. Might not the Confucian press Dewey's critique further to insist that there is, in fact, a real cost to transcendence—indeed, a "religious" cost—in that it takes a toll on the possibilities for the disclosure of personal meaning in one's actual relationships? That is, the power of the family to function as the radial locus for human growth in spirituality might be diminished when natural family and communal relations are perceived as being in competition with, a distraction from, or dependent upon some higher supernatural relations. Said another way, when human relations are subordinated to a personal relationship with a transcendent object of

[12] Dewey, *Middle Works* 4:12.

worship, whatever the benefits of such subordination might be, such dividends might well come at a cost to the fabric of family and community. In the Confucian case, it is persons themselves who emerge as objects of profound communal, cultural, and ultimately religious deference. Beyond the achievement of an intense religious quality felt in the everyday experience of their lives, these exemplary persons continue as venerated ancestors for their families and communities, and as contributors to the ancestral legacy—to *tian* 天—that defines Chinese culture more broadly construed. It is the cumulative investment of ancestors and traditional heroes over time that makes the cultural and the religious legacy determinate and meaningful.

We have seen that, for the Confucian it is the creative possibility within the inspired human life to enchant the cosmos that is the more important meaning of "religiousness." This enchantment in the "thoughtful" feelings of family and friends emerges in their mutual and reciprocated sensitivity and awareness. Indeed such appreciation spills over to become "value-added"—quite literally raising the value of the cosmos in which these meaningful relationships mature. Our shared cosmos is much appreciated, becoming a more magnificent time and place because of the profound, indeed, the inspired feelings we come to have for each other.

Ironically, what might be interpreted as a Confucian challenge to conventional religious institutions and practices might also be read as serving to liberate religiousness in a way not unknown within American revisionist theology. We might be inspired by the early twentieth-century theologian, Henry Leuba, who insists that:

> Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? Are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse. (Leuba, 1901, p. 572).

We might also appeal to Emerson's scandalous, yet wholly

inspiring, "Divinity School Address" when he observes that:

> Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have . . . a purpose[:] . . . to set free the capacities of human individuals . . . The test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility.[13]

Leuba and Emerson before him would both interpret real religiousness as persons achieving the fullest disclosure of their own uniqueness in contributing to cosmic significance and hence to an earned sense of belonging most meaningfully to this same cosmos. In thus creating themselves, they create their world.

The nature of creativity: Confucian religiousness as co-creativity

I would argue that Confucian religiousness is precisely this sense of co-creativity of self and world, and in fact that such co-creativity is the only kind of real creativity. Indeed, in this Confucian cosmology, nothing happens by itself. To make this argument, I want to explore this notion of co-creativity at several different levels, beginning from the Confucian claim that in our own personal collaborations—in my case, in the delightful intellectual and emotional journeys that I have enjoyed with D. C. Lau, David Hall, and Henry Rosemont—we have done much to create each other. Ascending to a more general level, I want to suggest that in Confucian religiousness, the focus of creativity is the transactional process of human beings shaping and being shaped by

[13] Dewey, *Middle Works* 12:186.

their fellow human beings in family and community.[14] And finally, at the highest and most pervasive level, I will invoke the Confucian notion of the "three capacities" (*sancai* 三才) and the claim that human creativity is an ingredient integral and necessary to further inspire the heavens and the earth in the evolving process of generating cosmic spirituality.

The several questions that will guide our exploration of our own assumptions about the nature of creativity itself and that will enable us to develop a clearer understanding of how this seminal idea functions within the Confucian tradition are: 1) To what areas of the human experience do we usually apply the notion of creativity? 2) Is there an equivocation when we use creativity and originality, and if so, why? 3) How are the notions of integrity, genuineness, sincerity, and creativity interrelated? 4) What are the roles of feeling and thinking in creativity? and 5) How is "creativity" expressed in a Chinese philosophical vocabulary?

Let me draw on our translation and interpretation of the *Zhongyong* to try to respond to these concerns about the nature of creativity. The standard English rendering of the *Zhongyong* is the 1861 translation of the Scottish missionary, James Legge. It references the earlier Jesuit translations, and has had and continues to have a profound influence on most subsequent European-language interpretations of this text. For Legge, the opening passage provides him with a familiar and uncontroversial account of cosmic order:

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[14] Although there is often an asymmetry in relationships, we only need to remember ***Analects*** 19.23 to appreciate the mutuality of the co-creative process:

衛公孫朝問於子貢曰："仲尼焉學？"子貢曰："文武之道，未墜於地，在人。賢者識其大者，不賢者識其小者，莫不有文武之道焉。夫子焉不學？而亦何常師之有？" Gongsun Chao of Wei asked Zigong, "With whom did Confucius study?" Zigong replied, "The way (***dao***) of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly—it lives in the people. Those of superior character have grasped the greater part, while those of lesser parts have grasped a bit of it. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu's way in them. Who then does the Master not learn from? Again, how could there be a single constant teacher for him?"

> What Heaven has conferred is called THE NATURE;
> an accordance with this nature is called THE PATH *of duty*;
> the regulation of this path is called INSTRUCTION.

On Legge's reading of the *Zhongyong*, this wholly-credible theistic beginning gives way to an unfortunate rambling, and indeed, blasphemous exaltation of human creativity that subverts the very ground of Christian worship. Upon having completed his translation, Legge is prompted to challenge the high estimate that the Chinese tradition has lavished on this text with his own pious reservations concerning its content and its influence. Legge laments:

> It begins sufficiently well, but the author has hardly enunciated his preliminary apophthegms, when he conducts into an obscurity where we can hardly grope our way, and when we emerge from that, it is to be bewildered by his gorgeous but unsubstantial pictures of sagely perfection. He has eminently contributed to nourish the pride of his countrymen. He has exalted their sages above all that is called God or is worshipped, and taught the masses of the people that with them they have need of nothing from without. In the meantime it is antagonistic to Christianity. By-and-by, when Christianity has prevailed in China, men will refer to it as a striking proof how their fathers by their wisdom know neither God nor themselves.[15]

What is particularly telling about Legge's honest if scathing evaluation of the *Zhongyong* is that he is wholly aware of the incongruency between his own theistic interpretation of the opening passage and the celebration of the cosmic magnitude of human creativity conveyed in the remainder of the text, a human creativity that challenges scriptural authority on human dependence upon a Creator God. Legge's understanding of the thrust of the *Zhongyong*, whilst wishing it were otherwise, is that human beings led by their sages have

[15]Legge (1960), p. 55. Another place in which Legge offers his personal commentary is in the ***Zhuangzi*** anecdote about the demise of Lord "Chaos" when order is imposed upon him by "Heedless" and "Sudden," the rulers of the north and south seas. Legge's comment is: "But surely it was better that Chaos should give place to another state. 'Heedless' and 'Sudden' did not do a bad work." Legge (1962), p. 267.

in their world everything necessary to achieve their own realization without reference to some transcendent deity, and moreover, that these exemplars so inspire the world around them with human creativity that the heavens and the earth too have no appeal beyond themselves to some more ultimate reality. Cosmic creativity is fully a collaboration between human beings and their world, a cosmology that is consistent with what John Berthrong calls "the world-dependent nature of divine reality." (Berthrong, 1998, p. 1).

Legge is not without good textual evidence for this human-centered interpretation of the *Zhongyong*. The opening passage of the *Zhongyong* emphasizes the capacity and the responsibility of the human world to achieve a creative harmony and balance in the expression of its feelings, and gives an account of how this human achievement conduces to a flourishing cosmos in which all things find their proper place. This radically situated, multilateral creative process is described unambiguously in this text by investing the Confucian term *cheng* 誠 with cosmic meaning. *Cheng* is a familiar term usually translated as "sincerity," "honesty," or "integrity," but herein it is used with an unfamiliar cosmological application that has prompted us along with other commentators to consider "creativity" as a possible rendering for it that captures this capacity:[16]

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[16] See Ames and Hall (2001), pp. 30–35 for our justification for translating *cheng* as "creativity" along with the commentarial evidence that supports such a rendering. Commentators late and soon have repeatedly defined *cheng* as "ceaselessness" and "continuity itself," and Zhu Xi in *Zhongyong* 20 glosses it as "what is genuinely real without lapse 真實無妄" and "what the patterns of nature really are 天理之本然," attributing to the human being "the desire to make genuinely real what cannot yet be so 未能真實無妄而欲其真是無妄." Wing-tsit Chan (1963), p. 96 puts these two aspects of *cheng* together as a changing, transforming reality and insists that *cheng* is "an active force that is always transforming things and completing things, drawing man and Heaven together in the same current." Tu Wei-ming (1989), pp. 82–83 concludes explicitly that *cheng* "can be conceived as a form of creativity" and that it "is simultaneously a self-subsistent and self-fulfilling process of creation that produces life unceasingly." While *cheng* without question entails a creative process, we will see that what really makes the translation of *cheng* as "creativity" problematic is the skewed way in which "creativity" has come to be understood in the English language.

> Creativity (*cheng* 誠) is self-realizing (*zicheng* 自成), and its way (*dao* 道) is self-advancing (*zidao* 自道). Creativity references things and events (*wu* 物) taken from their beginning to their end, and without this creativity, there would be nothing happening. It is thus that, for exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子), it is creativity that is prized. But creativity is not simply the self-realizing of one's own person; it is also what realizes other things and events. Realizing oneself is becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren* 仁); realizing the world is wisdom (*zhi* 知). This is an achieved excellence (*de* 德) in one's natural tendencies (*xing* 性) and is the way of integrating what is more internal with what is more external. Thus, when and wherever one applies such excellence, it is fitting.[17]

There are other passages in the *Zhongyong* that celebrate this human capacity to create meaning and to realize a world, characterizing the human being quite literally as a co-creator with the heavens and the earth. The text describes the collaboration between human beings and their social and natural environments in world-making, asserting that there is a profound symbiosis between human and natural creativity:

> Only those of utmost creativity (*zhicheng* 至誠) in the world are able to get the most out of their natural tendencies (*xing* 性). Only if one is able to get the most out one's own natural tendencies is one able to get the most out of the natural tendencies of others; only if one is able to get the most out of the natural tendencies of others is one able to get the most out of the natural tendencies of things and events (*wu* 物); only if one is able to get the most out of the natural tendencies of things and events can one assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth; and only if one can assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth can human beings take their place as a member of this triad.[18]

The *Zhongyong* continues, taking this celebration one step further to identify optimum human creativity with sagacity. The virtuosic

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[17] ***Zhongyong*** 25: 誠者自成也，而道自道也。誠者物之終始，不誠無物。是故君子誠之為貴。誠者非自成己而已也，所以成物也。成己，仁也；成物，知也。性之德也，合外內之道也，故時措之宜也。

[18] Zhongyong 22: 唯天下至誠，為能盡其性；能盡其性，則能盡人之性；能盡人之性，則能盡物之性；能盡物之性，則可以贊天地之化育；可以贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣。

human being is not only a source of meaning, but of cosmic enchantment. It describes the process and the value of human world-making in full celestial hyperbole:

> Only those of utmost sagacity (*zhisheng* 至聖) in the world have the acuity and quickness of mind needed to oversee the empire; have the tolerance and flexibility needed to win them the forbearance of others; have the energy and fortitude needed to maintain their grasp; have the poise and impeccability needed to command respect; have the culture and discernment needed to be discriminating. So broad, expansive, and profoundly deep, they demonstrate these several qualities whenever needed. So broad and expansive like the heavens themselves; so profoundly deep like a bottomless abyss: they appear and all defer to them; they speak and all have confidence in what they say; they act and all find pleasure in what they do.
>
> It is for this reason that their fame spreads out over the Central States, extending to the Man and Mo barbarians in the south and north. Everywhere that boats and carriages ply, everywhere that human strength penetrates, everywhere that is sheltered by the heavens and is borne up by the earth, everywhere that is illumined by sun and moon, everywhere that the frosts and dew settle—all creatures that have breath and blood revere and love them. Thus it is said that they are the complement of *tian* 天.[19]

The familiar Confucian claim that "everyone can become a sage" is often read essentialistically as an assertion that sagacity is some universally given potential in human nature that if actualized provides any person with those extraordinary talents through which to affect the world in some incomparable way. But given the Confucian conception of the relationally constituted person, this same claim might alternatively be read as a recognition that optimizing the human experience within the broad social, natural, and cultural context of this processual world

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[19] *Zhongyong* 31: 唯天下至聖，為能聰明睿知，足以有臨也；寬裕溫柔，足以有容也；發強剛毅，足以有執也；齊莊中正，足以有敬也；文理密察，足以有別也。溥博淵泉，而時出 之。溥博如天，淵泉如淵。見而民莫不敬，言而民莫不信，行而民莫不說。是以聲名洋溢乎中國，施及蠻貊；舟車所至，人力所通，天之所覆，地之所載，日月所 照，霜露所隊；凡有血氣者，莫不尊親，故曰配天。

described here in the *Zhongyong* is truly creative and consummatory, and that the spontaneous emergence of real significance in a continuing present within the ordinary business of the day is itself the meaning and content of sagely virtuosity. The potential to become a sage emerges over time within the successful narratives of those persons who become authoritatively human.

One might attribute Legge's outrage at what he interprets as unbridled hubris that challenges the very role of the Creator God to his stodgy Scottish "common sensism," a philosophical movement in Legge's nineteenth-century Britain. "Common sensism" provided a staunch and steadfast defense of the Christian religious and moral status quo that it took to be the anchor of common sense against a corrosive Humean skepticism. Whatever the source of Legge's displeasure, this reticence to allow the human being full partnership in cosmic creativity seems to be a common sense that is still very much with us today, and continues to be reflected in more contemporary translations of the *Zhongyong.* Translators of this text continue to follow Legge in presenting their readers with an unabashedly theistic understanding of the opening passage of the text. But unlike Legge, who is keenly aware of his own Christian assumptions and who thus recognizes the clear disjunction that the *Zhongyong* has with any theistic understanding of creativity, these interpreters insinuate a familiar conception of Divine creativity into the text, and in so doing, deny any real status to the human collaboration in producing cosmic order.[20]

When we ask the first of the questions guiding our exploration of creativity—To what areas of the human experience do we usually apply the notion of creativity?—we see that it is invoked most comfortably with reference to the disciplines of the arts and literature, that is, with respect to the entertaining occupations of producing artifice and fiction.

[20] W.T. Chan (1963), p. 95, for example, says of "the Way of Heaven" that it "transcends time, space, substance, and motion, and is at the same time unceasing, eternal, and evident."

But when we turn to the serious business of the day—morality, theology, science, and even "business" itself—"creativity" becomes suspect. If I were to learn that a friend is morally "creative," while I might properly stand in admiration of his rakish charms, I would also be concerned about his having anything but a passing acquaintance with my comely wife or my innocent children. If our religious neighbors are known to be theologically "creative," the Pope perhaps more than me is going to be worried about the status of their immortal souls. If a scientific colleague is described publicly as having been "creative" in his experiments with the cloning of human organs, his multi-million dollar grants might well be put at risk. And if my financial advisors have been "creative" in their accounting and I have become unseemly rich as a consequence, I am likely to be audited by the IRS if not jailed first. In the discipline of philosophy itself, one can argue that Gadamerian "play" is philosophically intriguing because it challenges the Aristotelian seriousness and rigor that we have traditionally ascribed to philosophical inquiry. Indeed, what was perceived by many as Richard Rorty's grinning assault on our discipline banished him beyond the walls of philosophy proper to Stanford's Department of Comparative Literature and earned him all but excommunication from our professional society.

In Legge's critical reading of the *Zhongyong,* he clearly sees this text's strident claims about human creativity as a kind of arrogance that pits a Promethean creative sage against the aseity of God. In so interpreting the text, Legge seems to be construing the Confucian sage as heroic—proud, intrepid, solitary—an exemplar apart who accomplishes superhuman feats. For Legge, such human innovation can only be the product of a kind of cunning (*sagacitas*) as opposed to the wisdom (*sophia* or *sapientia*) that belongs properly to God.

Character *sheng* 聖 (sage): Oracle bones, Bronze, Seals, Traditional.

And yet the image of the sage in the *Zhongyong* and other Confucian texts, far from being heroic, is rather one of a virtuosic collaborator and communicator who inspires the cosmos by orchestrating a thriving, inclusive human community in the ordinary business of the day. Sages like Confucius are not solitary and original. Rather, they have evolving corporate identities that have implicated within them the patterns of communal deference and meaning that are ultimately constitutive of the ethnic and national character. The sage (*sheng* 聖) appears on the oracle bones and later on the bronzes, constructed in its earliest form simply from "ear" (*er* 耳) and "mouth" (*kou* 口), with the *ren* 壬 element being added in the Western Zhou script. The character *sheng* 聖 shares an etymology with "listening" (*ting* 聽) and "sounding, voicing" (*sheng* 聲), and is defined in the *Shuowen* lexicon as "communicating with, pervading" (*tong* 通). The second-century text, *Understanding Popular Customs* (*Fengsutongyi* 風俗通義), defines the sage as "giving voice to and communicating": That is, "in listening to the voices and in understanding the feelings that are being expressed, he courses through the world and orchestrates the flourishing of the myriad of things."[21] The sage is the efficacious communicator, the embodiment of culture, the religious center of a tightly bound community. The collaborative creativity that we find in the *Zhongyong*

[21] *Fengsutongyiyiwen* 15 風俗通義佚文 15 Wu Shuping (1980), p. 415: 聖者聲也，通也。言其聞聲知情，通於天地，調暢萬物。

and the relational natural cosmology of ancient China broadly is a continuing *creatio in situ* rather than *ex nihilo* that references a continuing process of meaning-making rather than some initial originating cause.

Indeed, we can use the conditions of this *creatio ex nihilo* notion of creativity, an act of unilateral originality, to distinguish this understanding of creativity from classical Chinese cosmology. First, *ex nihilo* is dependent upon discrete agency, separating an exclusive creator from its creature. In the processual cosmology of ancient China, situation is always prior to agency. That is, the individual as agent is a conceptual abstraction from concrete, constitutive relationships. Creativity is radically situated and reflexive, where the act of creating and self-creativity are inseparable. Since such creativity is always transactional, to communicate effectively is to participate in the continuing process of reconstituting the world.

Secondly, *ex nihilo* focuses on originality as its source of value. *In situ* creativity on the other hand emphasizes enhanced significance over originality and novelty. Shared relationships that appreciate in meaning are the source of increased significance. *In situ* creativity is prospective in that it focuses on the productivity of its applications rather than looking back to retrospectively its putative "origins" as its source of value. For natural Chinese cosmology, to the extent that creativity could be isolated and limited to a discrete and independent agent, it would wither in its meaningfulness.

Thirdly, *ex nihilo* entails the logical problem of supposedly bringing "some-thing" novel into existence that is absolutely dependent upon its creative source. In itself, the putative "some-thing" is in fact "no-thing." For *in situ* creativity, it is the growth of constitutive relationships that is the ultimate source of meaning and that in this process of growth, transforms what is initially inchoate into "something" that is increasingly distinctive.

Fourthly, the *ex nihilo* model appeals to a source of novelty that

denies history, development, and process. For *in situ* creativity, on the other hand, it is precisely growth in significance that is the substance of history, and that tells the story of human evolution through the aggregation of episodic, consummatory events. Within the process of *in situ* creativity, using the language of William James, relations, transitions, and conjunctions are all real.[22] The dynamic nature of creative experience requires appeal to consequences as well as to antecedents, to possibilities as well as to precedents. It is this forward propensity of the human experience that gives it a consummatory possibility. This *in situ* conception of creativity accounts for both cumulative products of particular experience (a kind of causality), and spontaneous variations that survive because of their consequent efficacy (accumulating significance).

Finally, *ex nihilo* creativity appeals to a void beyond the wholeness of experience, whereas *in situ* creativity entails the indeterminate "nothing" (*wu* 無) as the constant correlate of the determinate "something" (*you* 有). Together the determinate and the indeterminate pneumbra constitute the ongoing process of experience. In a tradition in which all beginnings are fetal beginnings (*shi* 始), there is no notion of "void" but only a fecund receptivity.

We might take the classical Chinese canons including the *Zhongyong* as object lessons to illustrate this *in situ* notion of creativity. Most of the classical texts are not single-authored texts but are rather the work of many hands. Most of these texts borrow liberally and without attribution from the corpus of contemporaneously existing works that give them literary context. They are usually composite documents, with their significance aggregating in lineages that stretch across generations. But the process does not end there. Redactions of these canonical texts are passed on through succeeding generations who then collaborate with

[22] This priority of the quantitatively discrete is the target of William James when in the *Principles of Psychology* he argues for the reality of "conjunctions and transitions" in the stream of consciousness. See James (1984), pp. 47–81.

these works by appending their own interlinear commentaries that make them relevant to their own time and place, thereby adding new meaning as such annotations accrue across the centuries.

This commentarial tradition is growth in meaning by generation after generation of scholars correlating the canonical texts with the ordinary affairs of the day. It seems that the early Chinese thinkers were preoccupied with making the most of the phenomenal world of process and change construed simply as *dao* 道, "the unfolding field of experience," or *wanwu* 萬物," the ten thousand processes and events," or perhaps more simply put, "everything that is happening." These philosophers were less inclined to ask *what* makes something real or *why* things exist, and were more interested in *how* the complex relationships among the changing phenomena of their surroundings could be coordinated to achieve optimum productivity. It is this achieved personal, social, and ultimately cosmic harmony rather than any theological or teleological assumptions about origins or design that is their fundamental guiding value.

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