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Freedom and Responsibility in Confucianism and Dewey

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I. Introduction

A recent story in the New York Times about the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, profiles Sang Jun, a father whose child was killed when a school building collapsed in the quake. Sang is understandably upset and demands answers from the Chinese government about why the buildings were not strong enough. He is openly quoted as saying, “The government says, ‘Since you have a second child, why are you still asking about this?’ We tell the government: ‘This is your responsibility, this is your fault. So why shouldn’t we question this?’”¹ In China, the questions of freedom and responsibility are in the mouths of the people.

The present condition of the People’s Republic of China is something altogether different than could have been predicted either forty years ago when the Cultural Revolution came to an end or even twenty years ago during the Tiananmen Square incident. As the present financial crisis reminds us, the future of the Chinese people is

¹. Wong.

still being written, and it is not entirely clear how the government will adapt to the challenges it faces. Against this background, it is natural to wonder whether and how the government will meet its citizens' desire for freedom, in Chinese *ziyou* 自由.² Equally important is the question of if the government will come to better meet its responsibilities to the people. If the government cannot meet its responsibilities to people like the Sang family, then the people will assert their freedom to protest all the more openly.

One way that post-Mao era government has attempted to address the question of legitimacy has been through the rehabilitation of Confucianism in an effort to face the challenges of the new century with a uniquely Chinese ideology. Accordingly, well-wishing Western liberals may be concerned to learn that the term *ziyou* never appears in any of the major classical texts of Confucianism. The fact of *ziyou*'s absence, however, merely reflects its origin as Japanese coinage meant to translate the Western concept of freedom that was subsequently loaned back to the Chinese. As Orlando Patterson reports, before it was repurposed by the Japanese, it "had as its primary meaning 'licentiousness.'"³ Even today, as John Fairbank points out, the expression "liberalism rests on individualism under the supremacy of law" is written in Chinese with characters that might otherwise be interpreted as saying that "the doctrine of spontaneous license (*ziyou zhuyi* [自由主義]) rests on the doctrine of self-centeredness (*geren zhuyi* [個人主義]) under the supremacy of administrative regulations (*falü* [法律])."⁴ Accordingly, if we want to understand what a truly Confucian idea of freedom could mean for the Chinese people, we need to look beyond *ziyou* to find what term or terms served a similar role in classical Confucian thought to that played by freedom in our own thought.

Of course, the role of "freedom" in the West is far from univalent. Indeed, the libertarian and liberal vision of freedom might be said to pull in opposite directions.

² Note that, like many languages other than English, Chinese does not distinguish between "freedom" and "liberty." *Ziyou* is also the root of such terms as "liberalism," *ziyou zhuyi* 自由主義, etc.

³ Patterson, p. x.

⁴ Fairbank, p. 739. Referenced in Hall and Ames, *The Democracy of the Dead*, p. 234.

Moreover, terms like “freedom of the will” seem on the surface to be entirely orthogonal to the concerns of political freedom. “Responsibility” plays a similarly multivalent role in our discourse. The Chinese government has a collective responsibility to ensure the freedoms, safety, and prosperity of its people, but some argue that these three values trade off against one another. At the same time, we think of freedom of the will as what gives individuals their own set of responsibilities and, paradoxically that having an excess of responsibilities impinges on one’s freedom.

Accordingly, this analysis will begin by looking at some of the various categorizations of freedom proposed in the West while searching for common threads of practical use, in order to make sense of the role played by freedom in our thinking and its seemingly paradoxical relationship with responsibility. One of the most prominent of those threads is freedom as the free expression of one’s nature. Thus, if we seek to find what elements of Confucian thought are capable of serving the same role as freedom in Western thought, we must investigate what it means to have a nature in a Confucian context and how that nature can be expressed. With this understanding in place, we be able to elucidate the possibilities of freedom and dangers of tyranny that exist in Confucian thought and implicitly for the Chinese people today.

Throughout this investigation, John Dewey will be used as a bridge between the self-understanding of the West and a philosophical reconstruction of the early Confucian thought of the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Since Dewey is a product of his Western upbringing, he speaks in a vocabulary that is more accessible to us than that of the ancient Chinese, but since his thought bears many resonances with Confucianism, he provides us a better contrastive grasp of the issues at hand both through his commonalities with Confucianism against other Western thinkers and through his differences from Confucianism, where they exist.

II. Freedom in Western thought

A. Concepts of freedom

Mortimer Adler in *The Idea of Freedom* gives a “dialectical examination” of freedom and comes up with five distinct but overlapping “subjects of controversy” in defining freedom:

Circumstantial freedom of self-realization: Being able to act as one wishes for the good as one sees it.⁵

Acquired freedom of self-perfection: Through virtue, living in a way that befits human nature.⁶

Natural freedom of self-determination: Creatively changing one’s character through decision making.⁷

Political liberty: Being able to participate in governance as a citizen under law.⁸

Collective freedom: the achievement of the ideal social arrangement.⁹

Adler also notes that it is possible for one author to endorse more than one of these views of freedom, so that, for example, he associates Aquinas with each of the first four freedoms, but Marx only with the last. Interestingly, he associates Dewey with just the first three kinds of freedom. We will return to Dewey’s views in the next section.

While Adler’s investigation is dialectical and centers on the association of thinkers with concepts, Orlando Patterson in *Freedom* conducts his inquiry on a more narrowly historical basis. In retracing its evolution he finds that freedom is born with its opposite: deprivation by coercion. This pair, freedom and coercion, were in turn concretely embodied in the ancient world by the pair of master and slave. It was the practice of slavery which gave the formative debates about freedom their weight. Indeed, before beginning his book, Patterson’s original goal for the work that became *Freedom* was to

⁵. Adler, p. 5.

⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷. *Ibid.*

⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

write a history of slavery. It was only after he began his research that he realized that his scholarly aims could just as well be achieved through a history of freedom.¹⁰ To give my own example, when we reexamine Rousseau's well-known opening to *The Social Contract* with Patterson's prompting in mind, the language of slavery jumps to our attention: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they." With this contrast as his historical guide, Patterson then divides freedom into three categories—the personal, the sovereign, and the civic—while noting that our commonplace discussion of freedom often relies on the tensions and resonances between the three.

There are many other examples of how divide up freedom, but for our purposes, these basic categories will be sufficient.

B. The roles of freedom

With so many contrasting categorizations of freedom, it would clearly be foolhardy to declare any single definition the essential meaning of freedom. However, it will be helpful to look at some of the roles that its invocation plays in our society. One role is clearly that of "bullshit" as in Harry Frankfurt's example of the politician giving a speech about "our great and blessed country" at a Fourth of July celebration without any particular regard to the truth or falsity of the speech.¹¹ Unfortunately, this observation merely leaves us with the question of why "freedom" has so many positive connotations for the bullshitter to draw on.

Another role of the word freedom is, as suggested by Patterson, its role as an important social contrastive between those who do possess freedom and those who do not. Today, the importance of slavery as a practical matter is diminished,¹² but the

¹⁰. Patterson, p. xii.

¹¹. Frankfurt, pp. 16–18.

¹². For simplicity, this statement ignores on-going practice of slavery in some parts of the world, and the worldwide existence of human trafficking, sweatshop labor, etc. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the percentage of persons immiserated by slavery-like conditions is somewhat lower today than during the early modern period.

contrastive element is still made to do some work. I recall from my own childhood growing up in America during the waning days of the Cold War being told at age six that ours was a free country. This briefly baffled me, and I asked what that could mean if America is still a country that has laws. The answer is that our country was “more free” than the old Soviet Union. Thus, the term “freedom” is used to normatively mark differences in degrees of restraint. For example, the conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation annually publishes what it calls the “Index of Economic Freedom,” which ranks the degree to which different countries conform to their vision of the conservative, low-tax, low regulation utopia. The reason that the report is called the “freedom index” rather than the more accurate “laissez-faire index” is that the word “freedom” does important rhetorical and prescriptive work for the Heritage Foundation. Opponents of the Heritage Foundation’s agenda in publishing the report must first explain why it is that they oppose freedom.

The description of something as “free” means that we want more of it or that we ought to have more it, but at the same time, freedom is also used to romanticize deprivation. In the words made popular by Janis Joplin, freedom means “nothing left to lose,” yet we do not take that to be negative quality. Take for example a 2002 report on the life of Saddam Hussein in *The Atlantic* by Mark Bowden. In it, Bowden gives us a contemporary vision of the Sword of Damocles as an impediment to freedom:

Saddam is a loner by nature, and power increases isolation. **A young man without power or money is completely free.** He has nothing, but he also has everything. He can travel, he can drift. [...] But if he prospers through the choices he makes, if he acquires a wife, children, wealth, land, and power, his options gradually and inevitably diminish. **Responsibility and commitment limit his moves.** One might think that the most powerful man has the most choices, but in reality he has the fewest. Too much depends on his every move. The tyrant’s choices are the narrowest of all. His life—the nation!—hangs in the balance.

Why does the young man have freedom that the tyrant lacks? Because he lacks responsibilities. As such, the young man is free to act spontaneously from his impulses.

At the same time, however, and paradoxically, freedom is also a necessary condition of responsibility. Dewey in "Philosophies of Freedom" emphasizes this same point. Much like the other categorizers of freedom, Dewey finds there to be a multiplicity of forms of freedom common in discourse. His are freedom as choice, freedom as power, and freedom as reason. Dewey, however, also attempts to synthesize these three into a single freedom, what might be called, "freedom as rational conduct."¹³ For Dewey, this higher freedom rests on the creation of real choices, "the formation of a new preference out of a conflict of preferences,"¹⁴ and these real choices "can only be actualized through interaction with objective conditions."¹⁵ In other words, personal freedom rests on the foundation of political and economic freedom. His goal in speaking about freedom is thus a prescriptive revision of the existing ideals that lie behind it rather than a descriptive analysis of their composition. He explains that we may have "an inexpugnable feeling that choice *is* freedom,"¹⁶ but even more than choice, freedom is about the moral responsibility that comes with choice. The point of responsibility is that, unlike stones or trees, "holding men to responsibility may make a decided difference in *future* behavior."¹⁷ The question of compatibilism in free will, for example, is a question about whether our actions can bear moral weight even if they are physically predetermined. Just as slaves are not responsible for the ends to which their labor is put, so too if we lack freedom of the will, it is claimed, we are not responsible for our actions. Hence, on the one hand, we say that those without responsibilities, like the drifter, are more free, while on the other hand, we say that with freedom comes responsibility for one's actions.¹⁸

¹³ Term taken from Damico's summary of Dewey, p. 85.

¹⁴ "Philosophies of Freedom," p. 266.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264. Italics original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ While slaves are not morally responsible for the actions they are commanded to do, do note the bitter irony that they are nevertheless beaten by their masters when the results of those actions are not satisfactory.

In attempting to resolve this paradox, we must see what links freedom and responsibility together. If freedom is the spontaneous expression of oneself as a person, then as a consequence, responsibility for that expression inheres in the person. Thus, the question of freedom is, in part, a question of self-identity.¹⁹ To return once more to the question of slavery, we can see that Aristotle's "natural slaves" are denied their freedom because it is in their nature to serve as slaves. For such persons, should any exist, "Freedom is Slavery" as Orwell's Big Brother had it. It is also in this sense that it is possible for the freedom of Rousseau to be inborn. Because we are given a free nature at birth, it is a mere accident that we suffer enslavement.

Here we see hints at the resolution of the paradox of freedom as responsibility and freedom as freedom from responsibility: these are different images of what it means to be a human being. Just as the Western ideal of freedom is not univalent, so too, the Western concept of the human being is subject to innumerable variations. Thus, when thinking of the young man without commitments, Bowden sees his nature (and thus his freedom) as wanderlust. When the Western ethicist, however, considers humans as moral agents, the nature of persons as autonomous deciders comes to the fore and brings with a starkly different picture of freedom. Returning to the question of the use of freedom, we see that "freedom" is used to help draw normative implications from conceptions of the nature of human beings. "Freedom" is not only a descriptive name for the spontaneous expression of nature, it also prescriptively sees that expression as a good in its own right. As Dewey notes, we do not call the action of a stone expressing its nature "freedom," yet we do call humans' expression of their personal natures "freedom."²⁰ The difference between the two is that we have a higher view of the nature of humans.

¹⁹ Here we will avoid delving into the questions of existentialism and authenticity other than to note that they too rest on the assumption that our self-production and self-responsibility are bound up in what it means to be human. Much further work can be done in this area.

²⁰ *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, p. 264.

We can thus recast Adler's five freedoms as five reflections on human nature. The freedom of self-realization sees the self as a rational actor pursuing its passions. The freedom of self-perfection sees the self as striving for its natural perfection. The freedom of self-determination sees man as a morally responsible agent of choice. The freedom of political liberty agrees with Aristotle that man is the political animal. Finally, the Marxian vision of collective freedom sees humanity as consisting of classes that are now in conflict but someday to be reconciled. A similar analysis can be made of other visions of freedom.

In connection with these different pictures of human nature, it is also worth noticing the ways that different uses of the word "freedom" vary in terms of their extensiveness. Though the Declaration of Independence claims that we are all endowed with "unalienable Rights," this is surely a mere rhetorical flourish. It was only because King George III was able to and did alienate their rights that the colonists rebelled. Hence, of his five freedoms, Adler only calls freedom III (the natural freedom of self-determination) a "natural" freedom, ie. one that is truly universal and completely inalienable. As we have seen, however, his five other freedoms can also be described as "natural" freedoms, but natural in a different sense of the word. Thus, not only does the conceptual content of human nature vary in the West, so too does the fixity and universality of what is called "nature." Nature is not only what is inborn; it is also what is aspired to.

To recap, freedom plays an important role in Western discourse by creating normative distinctions on the basis of different views about the nature of the self. The Western self can be fragmented into as many different conceptions as there are different thinkers, but recurring themes in the Western idea of the self are the self as autonomous, the self as rational, and the self as morally responsible. With this background in place, we are now able to begin our investigation into both what concepts play analogous roles in Confucian thought and how the differences in those concepts will lead to differences in the expression of freedom in a Confucian context.

III. The concepts of nature in Confucian thought

Since freedom can be usefully seen as the normative expression of nature, to find a Chinese analog of freedom, it is helpful to understand the Chinese analogs of “human nature.” The obvious place to begin is with *renxing* 人性, the term most often used to translate “human nature” (person *ren* 人 + nature *xing* 性) into Chinese. Looking in the *Analects*, however, the term *xing* only appears twice.²¹ Neither of these references seem to be enough on their own to allow us to reconstruct a Confucian concept of *xing* without turning to other sources.

A more promising avenue is available in the *Mencius*, which both refers to *xing* repeatedly and engages in a philosophical debate about its meaning. Mencius famously takes the position that good (*shan* 善) is for *renxing* what seeking down is for water.²² However, as Roger Ames points out in “The Mencian Conception of *Ren xing* 人性: Does it Mean ‘Human Nature’?” there are reasons why identifying *renxing* too quickly with “human nature” is problematic. First of all, using *renxing* as a substitute for “human nature” in our thinking may cause us to think of it as universal and innate in a way that is not appropriate in a Chinese context. Of course, as we saw, many Western ideas of nature in connection with freedom are also limited in their extent, so perhaps with the right caveats the hermeneutic difficulties surrounding this difference could be overcome. This is the attitude held, for example, by A. C. Graham in *Disputers of the Tao*:

the [*xing*] of an animate thing, in so far as it was distinguished from *sheng* [生 “life” / “growth” / “birth”], meant the course on which life completes its development if sufficiently nourished and not obstructed or injured from outside. [...] Mencius uses [*xing*] precisely in the then-current sense, which is not quite that of English “nature.” Not that one must abandon “nature” and look for the exact equivalent. There are no exact equivalents [...].²³

²¹ Discouragingly, the first reference is, “We can learn from the Master’s cultural refinements, but do not hear him discourse on such subjects as our ‘natural disposition (*xing* 性)’ and ‘the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道)” (*Analects* 5.13. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 98). The second is a bit less discouraging but still enigmatically short, “Human beings are similar in their natural tendencies (*xing* 性), but vary greatly by virtue of their habits” (17.2, p. 203).

²² *Mencius* 6A/2.

²³ Graham, p. 124.

Against this problem of translation, Ames' more fundamental worries are that first, a too quick association of *xing* with nature conflates the differences between *xing* 性, *xin* 心 ("heart-mind"), and *sheng* 生, and that second, it undermines the difference between *xing* and *ming* 命 ("decree" / "command" / "destiny"). Graphically, the character for *xing*, 性, is made up of two components: 心 "heart-mind," which suggests its meaning, and 生 "life" / "growth" / "birth," which suggests its sound. Ames sees 生 as also paronomastically lending to 性 not only a suggest of originating in birth but ongoing vitality and growth.²⁴ Western scholars are apt to carelessly attribute Mencius' "four germs" or "stirrings" of morality (*siduan* 四端) to the "nature" of humankind to be good. In fact, Mencius attributes these initial stirrings of moral sentiment to *xin*, the heart-mind, not *xing*.²⁵ As such, it is *xin* which comes closer to being a natural endowment which may or may not be acted upon. This explains why *Mencius* 7A/1 tells us that "preserving one's heart-mind; nurturing one's *xing*—this is doing the affairs of Heaven (*tian* 天)."²⁶ "Nurturing one's nature" is nonsensical if "nature" is taken to mean a natural property like Adler's natural freedom of self-determination. "Free will" (should it exist) is born fully grown and needs no nurturing. On the other hand, preserving one's natural properties is an understandable injunction, since the loss of such entails the loss of personhood through death or severe disability. Hence the heart-mind is less in need of cultivation as it is of preservation. To be sure, the heart-mind is still less fixed than free will. Mencius warns in 6A/10 that selling out one's core values for an increase of wealth "is known as losing one's root heart" (*benxin* 本心). When the root is chopped off, the plant can no longer grow and begins to wither and die.²⁷ In 2A/2 he extolls the benefits of attaining to (as opposed to preserving from birth) what is literally translated "an unmoving heart"

²⁴ "Mencian Conception," pp. 150–1.

²⁵ *Mencius*, 2A/6.

²⁶ Original translation of "存其心，養其性，所以事天也。"

budong xin 不動心. Nevertheless, the point is that it is a mistake to allow our usual Western framework to cause us to think of *xing* as a fixed nature and *xin* as an ever-changing heart when the opposite is nearer the truth.

Ames' other concern, the difference between *xing* and *ming* 命 ("decree" / "command" / "destiny"), can be seen in most clearly in *Mencius* 7B/24, which explains that our biological capacities for taste, sight, etc. contain elements of both *xing* and *ming*, but are not called *xing* by the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), whereas our moral relationships contain both elements of *ming* and *xing*, but are not called by the exemplary person *ming*. From this, Ames concludes that while there is some space to talk about *ming* as "basic conditions," these basic conditions are what we "have in common with animals," not a uniquely human essence.²⁸

Ames' view of *renxing* in *Mencius* is not without controversy, however. Irene Bloom in "Mencian Arguments on Human Nature" criticizes Ames by arguing for a reading of *xing* that is universally held by humankind. On her reading, Mencius' goal is

to persuade Legalist-leaning rulers of their own potential for humaneness and to reassure them that humaneness is neither difficult nor impractical. Often he does this by reminding them that their people are much like them, sharing the same joys and the same sorrows.²⁹

In particular, Bloom draws attention to Mencius' repeated use of the phrase, "is possessed by all human beings" *ren jie you zhi* 人皆有之. From it, she concludes that Mencius is drawing our attention to reasoning something like the following,

The ancient [sage] kings had this mind; people of the present all have it as well; [...]. We become immediately aware that we have something in common with those ancient kings.³⁰

²⁷ Kwong-Loi Shun argues that the dispute in *Mencius* 3A/5 is about how Mohism has two roots—first one creates an image of the good (*yi* 義) and only then does one cultivate one's heart-mind to match that image—whereas Mencian Confucianism has only one root—the cultivation of the predispositions of the heart-mind. See pp. 134–5. Thus, the growth of the heart-mind is the single source of all normativity, and the loss of the root of the heart mentioned in 6A/10 is the loss of the ability to develop ethically.

²⁸ "Mencian Conception," p. 158.

²⁹ Bloom, p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

As such, Bloom feels that a reading of Mencius that de-emphasizes the universality of *xing* will also end up implicitly de-emphasizing not only the potential to sagacity, but our common humanity as well. Indeed, for Ames not only *xing* but being a person (*ren* 人) is a trait that can be lost:

[E]ven with *xin* (heart-and-mind)—the basic “ground” in which the *xing* is “rooted” (*gen* 根)—there are those human beings who, having failed to cultivate what is an incipient and fragile emblem of their humanity, do not qualify as human persons. They are inhuman (*fei ren* 非人). When Mencius says that “no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others,” he is also saying “any man who does not have a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is not really human.”³¹

Bloom also reinterprets passages that we saw as evidence for the Amesian conception of *xing* in order to support her position, so that in *Mencius* 7A/1, for example, although it speaks of “nurturing” (*yang* 養) our *xing*, “what we refer to as “cultivation” (*xiu* [修]) or “nurturing” (*yang*) has as much to do with preservation as with development.”³² In 6B/2, Mencius explains that,

If you wear the clothes of Yao, speak the words of Yao, and behave the way Yao behaved, then you *are* a Yao. On the other hand, if you wear the clothes of [Jie], speak the words of [Jie], and behave the way [Jie] behaved, then you *are* a [Jie]. That is all.³³

From this, Bloom concludes that, “Becoming the sage entails acting on our shared potential,”³⁴ and that the tone of the passage is essentially exhortative. Throughout her essay, Bloom repeats the phrase “our common humanity,” to stress what it is that we share with other human beings, especially the most sagely among us. From this same passage, Ames has concluded that there is nothing over and above the actions of the sage which constitutes a unique nature of sagacity or humankind. As such, there is no need to posit the existence of a “potential” for the common person to live up to.

³¹. “Mencian Conception,” p. 162.

³². Bloom, p. 38.

³³. Lau translation, p. 134.

³⁴. Bloom, p. 51, n. 53.

At this point, the basic exegetical divide between Ames and Bloom may seem on the one hand intractable and on the other hand utterly beside the point in a paper ostensibly about “Freedom and Responsibility.” I will argue, however, that this basic divide in the interpretation of *xing* does have important repercussions for our understanding of freedom. Ames' larger goal in “The Mencian Conception” and elsewhere is a rehabilitation of our conventional, perhaps vaguely Orientalist notion of Confucianism as a staid (possibly stagnant), conservative view of society. Against this, Ames wants to insist that what constitutes an achievement in Confucianism is open ended and unfixed by inner essences or limitations. This view of Ames' culminates in his treatment of 誠 *cheng*:

This term is commonly translated in the early literature as either “integrity” or “sincerity.” In our translation, we have introduced the term “**creativity**” as the most important meaning of *cheng* [...].³⁵

This may seem like a radical reinterpretation of the text. For example where Lau gives Mencius 4A/12 as, “There is a way for [a person] to be true to himself. If he does not understand goodness, he cannot be true to himself,”³⁶ Ames gives, “There is a way of being creative in one’s person. Persons who do not understand efficacy are not creative in their persons.”³⁷ The trade of “goodness” for “efficacy” (both 善 *shan*) seems within the bounds of the translator’s prerogative, but the trade of being true to one’s self and creativity is a further stretch that is entirely dependent for its adequacy on our view of how nature is expressed in Confucianism. Ames' translation is acceptable if we think that the way to be true to oneself is through creative expression but it fails if we think that the way to be true to the self is through expression of a previous fixed nature. In “The Way is Made in the Walking: Responsibility as Relational Virtuosity,” Ames acknowledges this tension by noting that while we have a high view of creativity in the arts, our view of creativity in other fields is quite low:

³⁵. *Focusing the Familiar*, p. 61. Emphasis mine.

³⁶. Lau, p. 82.

³⁷. *Focusing the Familiar*, p. 135.

[I]f I were to learn that Eliot Deutsch is morally ‘creative,’ I might properly stand in admiration of his rakish charms, but I would also be concerned about his having anything but a passing acquaintance with my comely wife or my innocent children.³⁸

The reason for our thinking this way is that in certain fields, we may entertain the notion of progress, but on the whole we still think, “Our unstated responsibility is to discover natural and particularly moral laws, and to do our best to act in accordance with them.”³⁹ As such, all progress is really progress toward a predetermined goal—exactly the sort thing that Ames insists is lacking in Mencius and Confucianism. Instead, Chinese thought attempts to create a normative ideal for living without thereby constraining our options in advance.⁴⁰ If this is so, then an Amesian view of “the nature of nature” will have an important impact on the nature of freedom as the expression of nature and whether it is the achievement of a creative novelty or a prespecified end.

I will not attempt to resolve the scholarly question of translation here, other than to note briefly the views of Kwong-Loi Shun in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, since it is outside of the philosophical question of which interpretation reflects better on Mencius, the political question of which interpretation the Chinese government is likely to take, and the practical question of what its consequences will be. Shun agrees with Ames that *xing* “by itself does not carry the connotation of something unlearned and shared” by all members of a species.⁴¹ On the other hand, Shun argues that the claim that all persons (*ren* 人) share ethical predispositions and responses is not merely a “terminological claim” made true by defining persons as the cultured animal but a “substantive comment” about what people are like and subject to empirical revision.⁴² We will return to the implications of the latter distinction shortly.

³⁸. “The Way is Made in the Walking,” p. 42.

³⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁰. Cf. *Analects* 18.8, where Confucius says he is different from others, “in that I do not have presuppositions as to what may or may not be done.” Rosemont and Ames, p. 216.

⁴¹. Shun, p. 187.

⁴². *Ibid.*, p. 191.

IV. Expressing nature in Dewey and Confucianism

If we accept provisionally an Amesian view of “nature” in Confucian thought as constituted by multiple components (*xing*, *xin*, and *ming*), aspirational rather than preposessed, and creative rather than fixed, what implications does this have for an understanding of freedom as the free expression of nature? To answer this question, it is helpful to return to the works of John Dewey, since his understanding of human nature is quite similar to the Confucian understanding outlined thus far, but because of his cultural milieu, he deals explicitly with the question of freedom, unlike the Confucians.

We previously noted that for Dewey, personal freedom is inseparable from political freedom, and that all freedoms require the broadening of the rational choices truly available. Here Dewey’s vision of freedom seems to be very compatible with the Confucian ideal. In the *Analects*, Confucius briefly recounts his biography, which culminates at age seventy, when “I could give my heart-and-mind free reign without overstepping the boundaries.”⁴³ Thus, for both Confucius and Dewey, as against Bowden, freedom is more than just the absence of strictures or responsibilities. It is the positive ability to act on one’s desires that is tempered by having desires that rationally reflect the options that will best lead to satisfaction. As Dewey explains in *Human Nature and Conduct*, in the “use of desire, deliberation, and choice, freedom is actualized.”⁴⁴

Since freedom for Dewey is about the proliferation of real choices, he opposes possessing too fixed of a notion of how to organize society. He writes that “the relation of individual freedom to organization is seen to be an experimental affair. It is not capable of being settled by abstract thought.”⁴⁵ (Compare this to *Analects* 15.31, where Confucius promotes the experimental project of *xue* 學 “learning” over the abstract practice of *si* 思 “thought.”) This willingness to experiment goes along with his belief in “the alterability

⁴³ *Analects* 2.4. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 77.

⁴⁴ *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 313.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

of human nature.”⁴⁶ It should not, however, be confused with a naïve belief in the infinite malleability of human customs. To the contrary, Dewey asserts that,

it is precisely custom which has greatest inertia, which is least susceptible to alteration; while instincts are most readily modifiable through use, most subject to educative direction.⁴⁷

Here we can again draw an analogy to the Confucian view of *li* 禮 “ritual propriety” as a product of prior generations that should only be changed with great care.⁴⁸

Dewey’s view of freedom stems not only from his vision of human nature as alterable but also from the unique grounding of normativity in his ethics, which rejects both the deontological and the utilitarian view of morality. On the one hand, Dewey castigates Kant for, in his view, failing to see that the reason that a good will is good rests ultimately on the consequentialist ground that its universalization tends to have good effects.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Dewey attacks the utilitarians for failing to see that, “Consequences include effects on character, upon confirming and weakening habits, as well as tangibly obvious results.”⁵⁰ A parallel may be drawn here to Mencius’ rejection of *li* 利 “profit” (not to be confused with *li* 禮 “ritual propriety”) as a motive for action. *Li*, besides having “indelibly Mohist taint,”⁵¹ is rejected by Mencius as a motive for human action since dwelling on profits rather than the incipient stirrings of the heart inevitably leads to social disorder since “those above and those below will be vying for profit and the state will be imperiled.”⁵² In the words of Dewey, “We cannot breed in men a desire to get something for as nearly nothing as possible and in the end not pay the price.”⁵³ From this, Dewey concludes that his goal must be the reformation of our habits so that rather than unintelligent aping previous behavior, they intelligently respond to the on-going change

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106, *passim*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴⁸ For example, *Analects* 9.3, where Confucius accepts one change in ritual practice but rejects another.

⁴⁹ *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Bloom, p. 21.

⁵² *Mencius* 1A/1. Lau translation, p. 3.

⁵³ *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 126.

in situations by seeing that “means” and “ends” are two parts of the same experience seen from the opposite perspective. Every end is a means towards some other end, and every means is an end in itself. As Ames writes in “Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism,”

For Dewey, it is not ideals that guide conduct as ends in themselves, but rather the direction comes from consummatory experiences in which such ideals are revealed. And consummatory experiences are themselves a shared expression of social intelligence dealing with unique situations as they may arise within the communicating community.⁵⁴

Thus, for Dewey the advantage of democracy as a political system should not be limited to mere efficiencies of governance as Churchill’s “worst form of government.” Rather, democracy itself is a means by which the understanding of the people as a whole can be broadened, and the polity itself made more free not merely through the granting of unalienable rights which the people always possessed anyway, but through the real inclusion of more people in the deliberative process. In “The Ethics of Democracy,” Dewey contrasts the democratic vision of an enlightened polity with the aristocratic vision of enlightened rulers. He finds that in democracy, the unity of the polity,

is not to be put into man from without. It must begin in the man himself, however much the good and wise of society contribute. Personal responsibility, individual initiation, these are the notes of democracy. [...] In one word, democracy means that *personality* is the first and final reality. It admits that the full significance of personality can be learned only as it is already presented to him in objective form in society; it admits that the chief stimuli and encouragements to the realization of personality come from society; but it holds, none the less, to the fact that personality cannot be procured for any one, however degraded and feeble, by anyone else, however wise and strong.⁵⁵

The understanding presented by Dewey of the freedom of democracy as the realization of the personality of the individual *through* the democratic collective gives us an insight into one of the most difficult to translate of Confucian terms: *ren* 仁. *Ren* is the highest of the Confucian virtues, and the goal of the Confucian project of self-mastery. It is at

⁵⁴. “Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism,” p. 12.

⁵⁵. “Ethics of Democracy,” p. 61–2.

once close at hand and far away.⁵⁶ It is alternatively translated as “benevolence,” “kindness,” “authoritative conduct,” or “humaneness.” One advantage of the translation of *ren* 仁 as “humaneness” is that it makes clear its aural closeness to *ren* 人 “person.” To become *ren* 仁 is to become a true human being. In “Ethics of Democracy,” Dewey has inadvertently provided us with another potential translation: “personality.” This relational virtuosity is the closest Confucian analog of freedom, but it does not inhere in all members of a state just because of the political construction of that state. Rather, the political construction of the state along with the relational construction of friendships, ritual life, and most importantly the family all contribute the opportunity for the individual to realize this virtue, but its realization ultimately rests on the individual’s making the most of the opportunities presented.

V. Freedom and the responsibility to prevent tyranny

Using Dewey as a guide, we have found an analog of freedom in the Chinese tradition. It is important, however, to notice how very different *ren* 仁 is from freedom as understood in the Western context. Confucius found his freedom only at age seventy, not at birth (as with free will) nor at the enacting of a political constitution (as with political freedom). Therefore, it is important for us to ask whether such a notion of freedom will be robust enough to protect the Chinese people from those evils that we believe the concept of freedom serves to protect Americans from. Fear is often a driving force in the development of a concept. According to Patterson it was the fear of slavery that drove the development of freedom in the West and with it a network of personal and political responsibilities that ensure its preservation. The debates surrounding the American constitution show that it was designed to prevent the deprivations of a power-mad king while still ensuring the general welfare. In the contemporary period, the fear that most shapes our political conceptions of freedom must be the fear of totalitarianism, partic-

⁵⁶ Compare *Analects* 6.5 and 7.29.

ularly Nazism and Stalinism.⁵⁷ Thus, for our own purposes, we must examine whether Confucianism can deal with these fears as deftly as it does the fears of its day: Does Confucianism provide the degree of responsiveness to the people necessary to allow the government to fulfill its responsibilities while upholding freedom?

Certainly, there are anti-fascistic impulses present in Confucian thought. Bloom, for example, draws our attention to the way that in the *Mencius* going against nature is associated with violence. Thus when Gaozi compares making moral persons to making cups out of willow branches, Mencius asks,

Can you make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? [...] If you must mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral? Surely it will be these words of yours men will follow in bringing disaster upon morality.⁵⁸

From this, Bloom draws the observation that, “while violence may deprive life, arboreal or human, of its resilience and capacity for growth, this must be seen as a despoliation, rather than a description, of the nature of trees or people.”⁵⁹

This anti-fascistic note is echoed in the *Analects*, where Confucius says, “If you govern effectively, what need is there for killing?”⁶⁰ and “To execute a person who has not first been educated is cruel.”⁶¹ The Confucian vision culminates with Confucius quoting admiringly, “If truly efficacious people were put in charge of governing for one hundred years, they would be able to overcome violence and dispense with killing all together.”⁶²

Similarly, Confucius tells us that the exemplary person seeks a true social harmony (*he* 和) not a bland conformity (*tong* 同),⁶³ and his injunction to “insure that the names

⁵⁷. Even in contemporary China, the many disasters of the Mao years are well remembered, if in silence.

⁵⁸. *Mencius* 6A/1. Lao translation, p. 122.

⁵⁹. Bloom, p. 37.

⁶⁰. *Analects* 12.19. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 158.

⁶¹. *Ibid.*, 20.2, p. 229.

⁶². *Ibid.*, 13.11, p. 164.

⁶³. *Ibid.*, 13.23.

are used properly" (*zhengming* 正名)⁶⁴ can be nothing but a condemnation of Orwellian newspeak.

That the ideals of Confucianism are anti-fascistic is beyond doubt. There is, however, still space to doubt how well the practice of Confucianism will be able to embody its ideals or whether its ideals are robust enough to prevent lapses in the practice of responsibility by the rulers towards the ruled if laws and rights are not explicitly codified. For example, we explained before that losing the Mencian germs of morality entails losing not only the possibility of true personality (*ren* 仁) but possibly even humanity itself (*ren* 人). Such language, however, is quite literally the language of dehumanization, and it is to counter such a tendency that Bloom is so insistent in positing that Mencian *renxing* is a universally shared and otherwise inalienable common humanity. The fear is that if there turn out to be barbarians who fail to see the superiority of Chinese culture, rather than looking inward to find the reason that their personality was insufficient to change others, the Chinese will instead look outward and see nothing but irredeemable subhumans. This is a very real fear for China's many ethnic minorities.

In Dewey's time, the question of whether democracy would be able to long endure in the face of totalitarian opposition was not merely a matter of academic speculation. Indeed, some of his contemporaries raised doubts about whether his philosophy was sufficient to combat fascism. For example, Waldo Frank in a 1940 article in *The New Republic* called "Our Guilt in Fascism" lays the rise of "anti-men" like Hitler at the feet of "empirical rationalists" like Dewey who enable fascism to take root by undermining transcendent moral values. Dewey's remarks in 1939's "Reaffirming Democratic Individualism" are intriguing because they reveal to us a side of the fascist threat that our current position obscures:

Strange as it seems to us, democracy is challenged by totalitarian states of the Fascist variety on moral grounds just as it is challenged by totalitarianisms of the left on economic grounds. We may

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.3, p. 162.

be able to defend democracy on the later score, [because of the economic problems of the USSR]. But defense against the other type of totalitarianism (and perhaps in the end also the Marxist type) requires a positive and courageous constructive awakening to the significance of faith in human nature for the development of every phase of our culture:—science, art, education, morals, and religion, as well as politics and economics.⁶⁵

As shocking as it may be to our sensibility to present fascism as a *moral* challenge to democracy, Dewey goes on to point out that the liberal project is doomed unless it can produce “works” to justify our “faith” in the ability democracy to overcome the technological changes in society, the problems of prejudice and intolerance, and even the difficulty of maintaining legitimacy in a post-Christian era. As such, the central question is whether it is we or the Nazis who are closer to being correct about the meaning of “human nature,” and this question will be answered by whether we can put our ideals into practice. Our legitimacy ultimately rests on the superiority of our vision of the human being, and the superiority of our vision rests on the lived experiences of all. The same questions confront Confucianism.

Thus, to wonder about whether Confucianism, though well-intentioned, has the resources to combat racism, prejudice, and dehumanization is to pass over all too quickly the blithe assumption that democracy does. Such an assumption will serve as news to African-Americans living before the Civil Rights movement (and to a certain extent even today) among other marginalized groups, too numerous to mention. As Rosemont and Ames point out, the historical misuses of the Bible are no more or less damning than the misuses of Confucianism.⁶⁶ Both the Bible and Confucian texts can be twisted to support tyrants and racists, but what is more important is our pressing to ensure that their noblest aspects are drawn from in order to support the creation of a better future. Ultimately, the only way to create a guarantee of rights for the minority is to instill in the majority a sense of responsibility for the preservation of those rights—a truth that Confucianism is quick to emphasize:

⁶⁵. “Reaffirming Democratic Individualism,” p. 226.

⁶⁶. *Chinese Classic*, pp. xiii–xiv.

Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.⁶⁷

We see in this passage that Confucius agreed with my sense of the issue as a child—a nation does lose freedom as it gains laws. Laws, in Confucianism, are merely the final mechanism to preserve the prospering of the people. That they are invoked at all is warning that something has gone amiss. The sorry state of human rights for enemy combatants during the Bush years confirms the importance of general sentiment over pieces over paper in the preservation of rights. It was because the average American had little concern for accused terrorists like Jose Padilla that it was possible for an American citizen to be held for three and a half years without being given a day in court, to give only one example of the inadequacy of laws to substitute for culture. Any speeches from the international community about the importance of human rights will fall on deaf ears in China unless given by a credible voice and in the language of the Chinese culture. This means that if Samuel Huntington is right that “Confucian Democracy is clearly a contradiction in terms,”⁶⁸ then so is “Chinese democracy.”

The key remaining issue for the question of freedom in China is what will be the role of democracy (*minzhu* 民主) in Chinese government. If “freedom” *ziyou* 自由 translates into Chinese literally as “spontaneous license” then democracy looks to the Chinese like “rule by the blind masses”⁶⁹—as it did to Plato. One clear difference between Confucius and Dewey is that Confucius is not as optimistic about the masses. He remarks that they “can be induced to travel along the way, but they cannot be induced to realize it.”⁷⁰ Most of his instruction is targeted instead at the exemplary persons who are to rule society. Mencius concurs that, “Some labor by their heart-minds; some labor by their

⁶⁷. *Analects* 2.3. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 76.

⁶⁸. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, p. 151, as referenced in Hall and Ames, *Democracy of the Dead*, p. 158.

⁶⁹. The character for “masses” *min* 民 derives from the idea of blindness. See Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, pp. 140–1.

strength. The former rule; the latter are ruled.”⁷¹ The degree to which these sentiments are seen as anti-democratic can be somewhat mitigated, however, if we understand that the line between those who use the heart-mind and those who use strength is not drawn at birth but develops during one’s lifetime. From the time of Plato up to the present day, republics have been specifically designed to deal with the problem that Confucius worried about by keeping the masses out of the finer technical mechanisms of governance through constitutional strictures while maintaining responsiveness through elections and the like. Of course, as the many tin-pot dictators of the world have shown, constitutions and elections do not guarantee rule that is responsive to the people. All of the trappings of a republic can be made into hollow shells if the spirit of the people and those who rule are not truly working in harmony.

Unlike republicanism, Confucianism does not try to solve the problem of making government responsive to the masses through the use of foreordained restrictions on possible laws and filtered channels of participation. Rather, from the side of the elites, responsibility to the masses is encouraged by promoting responsiveness to the relationships that constitute one as a person. From side of the masses, their own responsibility grows the more they aspire to *ren* 仁 “personality” and attain mutual regard through the exhortative example of exemplary persons.⁷² The key consideration is that rule through *ren* at its best is able to non-coercive lead the people without doing violence to the possibilities for cultivating human nature. Of course, this goal has not always been achieved in China, but neither have the highest ideals of democracy always been achieved.

⁷⁰. *Analects* 8.9. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 122. Ames and Rosemont note that while the received version of the text uses *you* 由, the same morpheme in freedom *ziyou* 自由, more ancient versions of the text use 道 *dao*. Neither variation is especially complementary of the people.

⁷¹. *Mencius* 3A/4. My own translation.

⁷². Cf. *Analects* 8.2.

VI. Conclusion

The New York Times story mentioned at the beginning of this paper includes the following detail:

On April 4, during Tomb-Sweeping Day, when Chinese honor the dead, groups of parents tried to gather at the sites of collapsed schools to mourn their children. Plainclothes police officers quickly surrounded them.⁷³

Confucian values run deep in Chinese society. The way to influence the Chinese government to show greater responsibility for its people and to offer them greater freedoms runs through Confucianism. Abstract lectures from West disconnected from our own practices impress no one. Confucianism contains within it a vision of freedom as the normative achievement of an open-ended relational virtuosity that is positively responsive to the needs of others. The encouragement that China should be receiving from Westerners at this uncertain point in their history is to embrace the greatest values of their culture. This by no means entails any “apologism” for the failings of the current government. One need not study Confucianism deeply to understand how far the disruption of funeral services falls from the ideal of governance or to realize that children should be alive and mourning at the graves of their parents and not vice-versa. Since today’s China is failing to live up to its own standards, there is no need to introduce a new set of standards with which condemn the current failings of their administrators. Of course, the issues of democratization and human rights cannot be entirely neglected, but to the degree that those values are attained, it will be as an expression of the aspirations of the Chinese. We must therefore encourage their Chinese government in terms of their own heritage to provide for their people.

As we see in the values of Confucianism, there is no irresolvable contradiction between nature, freedom, responsibility, safety, and prosperity, but neither is there any simple formula to correctly balance them. China has an opportunity to show us

⁷³ Wong.

a different aspect of human nature than is seen in the Western model in enacting its values in a unique way. Rather than the individual as consumer and contractual agent, if properly developed, China may show us the human as developing personality through rituals and relationships. We cannot say in advance of such an experiment which vision of human nature best matches its aspirations to the world, but the richness of Chinese history gives us some provenance to hope that the Confucian vision can also see fruit if we in the West encourage the Chinese to look to the best of their indigenous traditions.

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