

# A Comparative Study on the Quest for Individuality in Confucianism and Dewey

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## Abstract

This paper explores the issue of individuals in Confucian tradition from a comparative perspective, by viewing it alongside of American Pragmatism, as expressed by the philosopher John Dewey. Dewey devoted much effort to describing people as necessarily social beings without losing track of their status as unique and independent individuals capable of forming the basis of a democratic society. It is striking to note the converging points in the two remote strains of thought on the relationship between an individual and a society. By taking a comparative perspective, my aim is to describe the points where the two diverge in their views on the relation between individuals and society, and to examine how their notion of the individual can lead all the way to an uncompromising insistence upon democracy in the case of Dewey, but fail to envision democracy, and even still impeded efforts to bring it about in a full-blown sense in the other. Confucianism, I argue, suffers from inner conflicts that pose a particularly important contemporary dilemma, and has to meet a challenge of making itself compatible with democratic ideals of equality and individual freedom. Dewey's thoughts on the relation between the individual and the society could help us reinterpret Confucian ideas of individuals.

**Keywords:** Individuals, society, Confucianism, American pragmatism, Dewey

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## 1. Introduction

When one considers Confucian values in the modern context,<sup>1</sup> the most baffling question to consider is whether or not they can get along with the ideals of democracy, equality and freedom. This question seems pressing not only in the context of the recent effort to recast Confucianism as a living force in the contemporary world (including the East and the West), but also in the context of the actual political quest for democracy in the Far Eastern countries where, in many cases, Confucianism is still a living cultural reality. If democracy is the destination every contemporary political system aspires to reach, efforts to measure and evaluate Confucianism it is not merely an intellectual quest for Far-easterners, but an existential quest to live in a better world by establishing modern ideals in such a way that they do not conflict with or are not dragged on by the premodern tradition. But it seems that we have to go long way until we make Confucian democracy a reality, notwithstanding recent strong optimism concerning the remaking of Confucianism put forward by the “Confucian project” of Tu Wei-ming.

My concern in this essay is to explore the possibility of Confucianism coming to terms with democracy in view of the existence of individual as a socio-political unit. Before hailing Confucian humanism and communalism, I think we must take note of the fact that, however fully they are compatible with democratic ideals, and however humanistic they are in essence, Confucian ideals have never afforded a democratic society in the East even in its least form. And we must also think about the reason why that has been the case, and about the possibility of some internal elements or logic of Confucianism being responsible for that unfolding of history. I argue that there is irrevocable conflict among Confucian values, especially *ren* 仁 (i.e., *jen* in Wade-Giles, benevolence, or humanity) and *li* 禮 (propriety, or rules of conduct), and that *ren* and *li* function in a conflicting way that keeps individuals from full self-realization as social subjects and from growing into citizens in a democratic society.

I will also consider the issue of individual in Confucianism from a comparative perspective, as contrasted with American Pragmatism, expressed especially in the thought of John Dewey. Dewey devoted much effort in depicting the individual as necessarily a social being without losing his emphasis on unique and independent individuals as the basis of democratic society. It is striking to note the converging points in the two remote strains of thought on the relationship between an individual and a society.<sup>2</sup> But in addition to the intellectual amazement, the comparison

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1 As there is no unified system of Confucian values or Confucianism as such, I use “Confucian values” or “Confucianism” in a broad sense including the thoughts of not only Confucius and Mencius, but also of various Confucian and neo-Confucian schools. The multiple veins of thought developed on the basis of pretty much unified Confucian problematics made the sense narrow enough to represent them as a philosophical unity as German Idealism or Continental Rationalism in the western tradition.

2 In fact, it is even more intriguing to note some aspects with respect to which the two quite remote intellectual traditions come closer than one can imagine on the surface level. I think that an interesting comparison can be made with respect to the concept of truth, the relation

serves its own purpose. By taking a comparative perspective, my aim is to see the point where the two diverge from their similarly held views on the relation between individuals and society, and to examine how similar views on the individual can make all the way to the uncompromising insistence upon democracy in the one, but fail to envision and even still hamper the development of democracy in a full-blown sense in the other. That way, we may have better understanding of both.

## 2. Individuation: Christian and Confucian Models

It is often believed that individualism and the highly-developed consciousness of individual rights in the West owe much to the idea that all men are equal before God. The conception of God-given rights or natural rights has provided a cause for people to fight for both liberty (from church and the nobility) and democracy. Dewey, though not an advocate of individualism based on natural rights, is one of those who acknowledged the importance of these ideas in the formation of western culture, as we find him saying:

Cicero had maintained that every man had its principles innate within him....The Roman law itself was most often used in the interest of absolutism, but the idea of a natural law, and so of a natural right more fundamental than any human dictate, proved a powerful instrument in the struggle for personal rights and equality. 'All men naturally were born free,' wrote Milton. 'To understand political power right,' wrote Locke, 'and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature; without asking leave or depending on the will of any other man....These doctrines found eloquent portrayal in Rousseau, and appear in the Declaration of Independence of 1776.<sup>3</sup>

We may find passages in similar spirit in Confucian texts: "The commander of three armies may be taken away, but the will of even a common man may not be taken away from him,"<sup>4</sup> "Therefore all things of the same kind are similar to one another... The sage and I are the same in kind,"<sup>5</sup> "From the fact that we possess the principles of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, we know that others also possess them. Of the thousands and tens of thousands of human beings and of all things, there is none independent of these moral principles."<sup>6</sup> "The innate

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between knowledge and action (or the primacy of action), anti-representationalism, contextualism, naturalism and so on.

3 Dewey, *Ethics*, 143. Hereafter I follow the general convention of referring to Dewey's work as in "MW 5: 143" where MW stands for The Middle Works, numbers for a volume and a page. Also EW for *The Early Works*, and LW for *The Later Works*.

4 *Analects* 9.25: "三軍 可奪帥也 匹夫 不可奪志也." For translation, Wing-chit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 36.

5 *Mencius* 6A.7: "凡同類者 舉相似也...聖人 與我同類者." For translation, Chan, *A Source Book*, 55. cf. 6A.6, 4B.28, 32.

6 Zhu Xi, "The Nature of Man and Things," sec. 46: "自家有這仁義禮智 便知得他也有仁義禮智 千人萬人 一切萬物 無不是這道理." For Translation, Chan, *A Source Book*, 617. Concerning

knowledge of my mind is the same as the Principle of Nature....And it is possessed by all men.”<sup>7</sup> Why couldn't all these avid claims to equality in rational ability and human dignity have led to the struggle for procuring individual rights? How does a similar view of the natural endowment of reason and will in human beings have given rise to the concept of natural rights in one culture, and that of natural duty in the other? I use the term 'natural duty', as it counts as the natural duty of human beings in Confucianism to submit themselves to the dictate of the principles of humanity as the Way of Heaven or Nature (*tianli* 天理), or as the Way of Tao (*daoli* 道理). It is of course a moot point whether only Confucianism is responsible for the historical development in the Far East. But, considering the fact that, from the very early stage of its civilization, Confucianism has contributed much to the formation of political ideals and bureaucracy and to the content of education and morals in the East no matter the dominant religion of a given period, the above questions are worth considering.

One clue for approaching the questions may be found in the comparison between Christian and Confucian models regarding personal individuation made by R. C. Neville. Neville notes that Christian individuation is made through a contractual relation with God while Confucian individuation occurs through harmonized social, psychological, and physical structures.<sup>8</sup> In Christian contractual model, he further notes, there is a double relation of individual to society because of society's having an ontological ground, other than moral and ritual ground, in God or in a primordial community of people (in the case of secular culture). Thus, while one has social roles and responsibilities, one also has a covenantal responsibility to the founding being. The neglect of the former brings about shame, but that of the latter guilt its effect turning one against oneself. In the ontological dimension, one's identity stands against their social relations. As Neville puts it, “one's personal identity in the dialectical depths of guilt is defined in the alienation of endless doubling of the depths of self” (Neville, 131). Here, “the unit of identity is the self, the autos” (Neville, 132). All that matters is one's relation to oneself in face of “the demands of the contract” with God. Following Neville, we may say that the ontological dimension in the western Christian model of individuation made it possible for one to stand against the world, insomuch that the world was conceived as existing in violation of the ideas of equality and of covenantal individuality.

On the other hand, Confucian individuation is made possible through carrying out socio-moral obligations and perfecting shared social codes. Self-cultivation and personal development cannot be pursued without growing sensitivity to and an appreciation of the network of human relations and one's roles within that network. As personal identity cannot be separated from identifying the structural relations in one's own society and

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the Neo-Confucian discussion of *li yi fen shu* 理一分殊, which means, “The Principle is one, but its manifestations are many,” and Chu His's analogical exposition of egalitarian perspective, see Donald J. Munro, “The Family Network, the Stream of Water, and the Plant: Picturing Persons in Sung Confucianism,” in *Individualism and Holism*, 259-291.

7 Wang Yangming, “Instructions for Practical Living,” sec. 155: “五心之良知 即所謂天理也 良知之在人心.” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 683.

8 Neville, *Behind the Masks of God*, ch. 8.

mastering its rules of conduct relative to one's place in it, an acknowledgement of the equality of all humans and the absolute dignity of persons will necessarily leads to the acknowledgement of an equal obligation among individuals to respect the social morality which regulates the community's structural relations by prescribing relative moral obligations depending on social roles. (Even the king was not an exception.) It seems, at this point, that the motivations for the pursuits of personal rights in the Christian model and of moral obligation in the Confucian model are the same, i.e. self-fulfillment, whereas the effects and the consequences are radically different, being the development of an individualistic contractual politics in one case and the development of a holistic and familial moral politics in the other.

However, moral obligation in the Confucian model is taken not merely as a social duty, but as a natural one, since one's moral and ritual performance follow the dictate of Heaven or Nature and thus go beyond the realm of mere social significance. Nor are one's duties simply confined to a social and historical context. It is true that fulfilling moral obligations in Confucian context is characteristically of a social nature and also there are elements that make morality a matter of "adjustment to the world,"<sup>9</sup> as Weber put it.

But it is also true that there is a fundamental moment in which individuals spontaneously connect themselves to *ren* as a universal principle or the Mandate of Heaven or the Principle of Nature.<sup>10</sup> The moment is not as much social as metaphysical since it relates one to the very condition of one's own being as a human and thereby to one's very own self. Mencius epitomized this moment in following terms: "He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature (*xing* 性). He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one's mind and to nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven."<sup>11</sup> Confucius (a.k.a., Kongzi 孔子, 551-479 BCE) also wrote, "To master oneself and return to propriety is humanity. If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity. To practice humanity depends on oneself."<sup>12</sup> To perform one's moral duty is not, according to these positions, just to play one's social role and obligation, but to be in harmony with all things in the universe under *ren* or the principle of Heaven. It is, in other words, to follow one's own nature and thereby Heaven, as was intimated by this saying in the *Doctrine of the Mean*: "What Heaven (*tian*) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (*dao*). Cultivating Way is called education."<sup>13</sup>

The metaphysical moment becomes especially important in the Neo-Confucian context where the pursuit of *ren* commits one to an ontological

9 Weber, *The Religion of China*, 235.

10 I would like to use the expression "spontaneously" with some reservation, as the nature of spontaneity in the Confucian context must further be explored in relation to the way an individual relates to the Mandate of Heaven.

11 Mencius 7A.1: "盡其心者 知其性也 知其性 則知天矣 存其心 存其性 所以事天也," tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 78.

12 *Analects* 12.1: "克己復禮爲仁 一日克己復禮 天下歸仁焉 爲仁由己 而由人乎哉," tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 38.

13 *Doctrine of the Mean*, 1: "天命之謂性 率性之謂道 修道之謂教," tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 98.

level going far beyond social dimension. In the Neo-Confucian tradition, to become a man of *ren* (a sage or a man of perfect virtue) is to become one body with all things in the universe. *Ren* is the mind of Heaven and Earth to produce things. As humans also received this mind as their minds, *ren* is also those human's mind. *Ren*, as the principle of producing myriad things, was thought to produce seasonal properties (origination, flourishing, advantages, and firmness) in Heaven and Earth, and more qualities, such as the principle of love, in humans. Thus, by perfecting moral virtues, one does not merely achieve social fit, but more importantly a person achieves unity with all humans and other things. In this spirit, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) interprets Confucius's advice to "master oneself and return to propriety" (*keji fuli* 克己復禮) as suggesting that "if we can overcome and eliminate selfishness and return to the Principle of Nature, (*tianli*, Principle of Heaven), then the substance of this mind (that is, *ren*) will be present everywhere and its function will always be operative."<sup>14</sup> Wang Yang-ming also claimed that we, being based on innate knowledge, could share with all a universal sense of right and wrong. Partaking in this innate moral consciousness, we become one with myriad things in the universe.<sup>15</sup> In this metaphysical moment, all that matters is one's relation to Heaven or the Way or the Principle (*li*).

If, following Wang, we interpret Heaven or the Way or *li* 理 to be related in some way to Mind (*xin* 心), the metaphysical moment constitutes the moment one turns to one's self. Contemporary scholars on Confucianism make the best use of this metaphysical moment to establish a strong self-transforming Confucian subject<sup>16</sup> not to be diffused in the network of human relationships. It is the moral subject who spontaneously carries out his or her moral duties to be one body with others, but with his or her eyes always looking into his or her own self for growth. It is the self-reflective and sincere moral subject standing in contrast to those who "act without understanding and do so habitually without examination."<sup>17</sup>

Because of the metaphysical aspect mentioned above, the contrast between the Christian and the Confucian models of individuation acquires a more complex layer than was first deemed. It even provides a moment in which individuals stand against society in the Confucian context. When one's society goes awry by running counter to Confucian ideals, one could fight for one's right to be a moral being, and for dignity. This struggle would not be to establish the right to own what belongs to one, but a fight for the very condition of one's existence as (or to become) a moral being. If a king and his subjects or the general social surroundings are not in accordance with what is taken to be the Way of Heaven, then a Confucian who felt "righteous anger" (*yifen* 義憤) must fight for his own cause because the social setting stands in the way of his self-fulfillment, which is

14 Zhu Xi, "A Treatises on *Ren*": "如說 '克己復禮' 亦只是要得私欲去後 此心常存耳 未說到行處也。" tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 594.

15 Wang Yangming, *Chuanxilu*, sec. 179: "世之君子惟務其良知 則能公是非...而以天地萬物為一體。"

16 Tu Weiming emphasizes the two aspects of a Confucian self, that is, the self as a center of relationships, and the self as a dynamic process of spiritual development. See Tu, *Confucian Thought*, 113-130, and *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6: 239-246.

17 Mencius 7A.5: "行之而不著焉 習矣而不察焉," tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 79.

reached only by performing the Way of Heaven. The fight may take the passive form of retreating from society, but often takes a more active form of writing letters to the king and even risking one's life. Confucians in such positions have sometimes committed suicide from shame and anger, or as an expression of protest. Now a lingering question comes to the front, that is, how can these incompatible conceptions of the self, the self as being dependent on relations and the self as transcending the limits of relations be invoked in one philosophical system? How are we to understand the conflicting aspects of a Confucian self? It is with respect to this question that the comparison with Dewey becomes illuminating.

### 3. Dewey and the Social Individual

Dewey comes very close to the Confucian conception of self, when he claims that the identities and the fulfillments of individuals come from communal participations:<sup>18</sup> "Men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to men" (EW 1: 231). "Individuality is not originally given but is created under the influences of associated life" (MW 12: 193). "Assured and integrated individuality is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions" (LW 5: 66-67).

Dewey's conception of social self is in radical opposition to Lockean and Hobbesian conceptions of the individual as a self-enclosed unit in which political and economic institutions such as democratic government, general suffrage, and private property have traditionally found justification. Even the philosophical theories of knowledge and psychology have traditionally appealed to the self, or ego, in the form of self-consciousness, the access to which is denied to others. In opposition to this tradition of individualism, Dewey claims that customs and institutions, as well as tools, materials, and techniques, are all grounded in both associated actions, like learning and communication, as well as their association with the past (tradition).<sup>19</sup> For Dewey, desires, wants, and intentions also are not naturally or organically formed on an individual level, but operate as functions of an associated life. Even knowledge is functions of association and communication:

It [knowledge] depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned. Faculties of effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers (LW 2: 334).

Thus, for Dewey, existing customs and institutions are to find their ultimate justification not in the individual but in the community.<sup>20</sup> The

18 For a more detailed discussion of Dewey's individualism in the more general context of social philosophy, see Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey*, ch. 5.

19 Cf. "The Public and Its Problems," LW 2: 235-372, especially ch. 3.

20 Dewey uses "community" as meaning a special society "in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense

concept of self as creation of associated life is part of Dewey's general claim that "nothing in the universe, not even physical things, exists apart from some form of association; there is nothing from the atom to man which is not involved in conjoint action." "Apart from the ties," he says, "which bind him to others, he is nothing" (LW 7: 323). Even an individual in total isolation, like Robinson Crusoe, is in associated life, as prior social connections and associations still persist in his memories, expectations, imaginations, and emotions. Furthermore, he must think in the language he shares with others in the past and the present. Humans need community and relatedness to become human and develop their individuality: "To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community (LW 2: 332).

For all of his rigorous claims on the essential sociality of the individual, Dewey was also a strong believer in the uniqueness, irreplaceable value, and distinctiveness of the individual, claiming: "Life still centers in individuals, and always will" (LW 11: 388). As a center of associated life, an individual's thoughts and beliefs are *spontaneous* functions of the community life he or she shares with others. Dewey also believed that unless consensus is generated from the spontaneous participation of individuals and there is a vital interplay between an individual and community, there is only benumbing conformism everywhere. Thus the value of individuals involves their ability to form new conceptions of things "differing from that authorized by current belief" (MW 9: 305). The importance of individuality lies in the fact that new ideas, experimental creation, and directing change in a society only come from individual minds. Individuality thus involves the internal and intellectual workings of mind such as "feeling things, thinking things, and doing things, something which goes into, colors and dyes everything which a person has to do with" (MW 15: 171).

For Dewey, the key to the reconciliation of individuality and communal ideals<sup>21</sup> is the idea that individuality is in its essence intellectual, i.e., it has to do with "thinking for one's self" (MW 5: 175). While Dewey thinks that the principle of individuality is "having a place and work in the world that no one else can quite do" (MW 15: 171) and that one can develop individuality only in social groups (MW 5: 176), Dewey's individual is not merely a role-player, nor a mere conformist. For Dewey, the individual is someone who is able to make thoughtful considerations, and is made (not given as ready-made) from constant dynamic processes and social interactions. This person may sometimes run into conflict with authority and

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of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being" (LW 2: 350).

21 Within his conception of individual, Dewey claims that neither "social" nor "individual" has any fixed meaning. "Individual" is "a blanket term for the immense variety of specific reactions, habits, dispositions and powers of human nature that are evolved, and confirmed under the influences of associated life" (MW 12: 194). "Society" also "covers all the ways in which be associating together men share their experiences, and build up common interests and aims" (MW 12: 194). The dichotomy between society and the individual is thus unreal, and empty. In fact, what exists is only the conflict, if any, between some individuals and some arrangements in social life, between groups and classes of individuals, between nations and races, and so on, but not between society and the individual.



with established views. In fact, it is through this conflict that the growth of individuality takes place. Thus, in an ideal community, “the more you have of real social unity, the more diversity, the more division of labor, and the more differentiation of operations there is” (MW 15:176). Dewey’s individual is in full control of his or herself in the sense that he or she makes critical judgements about what is happening in their surroundings and considers his or her own action with respect to social changes, though with keen awareness of the fact that all one’s habits, dispositions, and powers are under the influences of associated life (MW 12: 194) and that even one’s self-knowledge is made possible only through the social medium (MW 5: 388). The intellectual aspect of individuality provides the basis on which diversity in a community is made possible as well as the concept of individual as a center of associated life.

As in Confucianism, the internal and intellectual aspect of individuality in Dewey also serves a moral purpose. In Dewey’s thought, self-fulfillment is made possible through the performance of unique social roles and actions based on good judgments predicated upon the needs and possibilities of various situations, whether or not these judgments conform with established values. To very act of considering current matters, consequences, apt choices, and the direction of changes to be made in one’s decision making is already a moral commitment. But morality is not merely of a social nature, as the evolution of life tends toward the struggle for a moral existence. Just as the self-fulfillment of a Confucian self necessarily leads to the Way of Heaven or Nature, so too does Dewey’s individual participate in the process (way) of nature (while the Confucian Heaven or Nature may not be the same as Dewey’s nature, they need not be radically different.) For Dewey, the emergence of a moral existence in nature seems unavoidable as higher forms of life emerge:

With the dawn of higher forms of life, cooperation and sympathy prove stronger forces for progress than ruthless competition. The 'struggle' for any existence that has a claim to moral recognition must be a struggle for more than physical existence or survival of force. It must be a struggle for a *moral* existence, an existence of rational and social beings on terms of mutual sympathy and service as well as of full individuality. (MW 5: 477-78)

Now, with this striking parallel of thought, we may ask, can the Confucian context accommodate democratic ideals of equality and freedom with as much ease as Dewey? If not, why not?

#### **4. Confucian Self: a Net of Graded Relations**

To cultivate effectively operative good judgment or taste for intellectual, esthetic, or moral values is, according to Dewey, “the supreme task set to human beings by the incidents of experience” (LW 4: 209). What matters for an individual and in education is the power of thought, the ability to consider matters deliberately, to inquire, to test, and to make judgements about available evidence. Even though this emphasis on intelligence ultimately has the moral purpose of

enhancing the social good by letting one choose the best possible course of action in a society, it contrasts with the Confucian emphasis on self-examination against the mirror of universal moral ideals as ramified in *li* and the conducts of sage-like people: Mencius says, “There is no greater joy than to examine oneself and be sincere.”<sup>22</sup>

While Confucius says that “[t]here are those who act without knowing [what is right]”, and he is not one of them, he prefers knowing what is right and wrong by innate knowledge to making empirical inquiries and deliberations based on evidence: “To hear much and select what is good and follow it, to see much and remember it, is the second type of knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, even the knowledge and the intellectual ability of discerning what is “upright” (*zhi* 直) and what is “crooked” (*wang* 枉)<sup>24</sup> is not valued, unless it makes the crooked upright, i.e., unless knowledge becomes practical.<sup>25</sup> Practicing moral conducts actively using one’s own body as in performing *li* has primacy over critical intellectual knowledge. The reason why intellectual ability and critical thinking were not much emphasized is that Confucian inquiry is not as open-ended as it is in Dewey’s thought. A Confucian man and woman know where their ultimate destination is, and, in many occasions, believe that they can get there either by following the paths of sage-like people or the ways of *li* that prescribe the ways of conduct proper to one’s role in a family and a society.

Thus, in Confucian texts, we do not find much worry about the problems of decision-making, the freedom of the will, and moral scepticism on moral ideals. What is more important is the problem of identifying the good and the bad in other people whereby one knows what to adopt as a model from them and what to correct in oneself, if one has the same bad qualities as one finds in them.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of self-correction, or edification, one needs self-examination. Identifying the good and the bad in Confucian context is often made easy by Confucian ritualism, as it lays out highly concrete and objective rules of conduct that would manifest the good moral qualities. A Confucian man is not as much worried about decision-making as he is in turning inward to examine whether or not he is not following Confucian values and the rules of propriety: “Tseng-Tzu [i.e. Zengzi] said, ‘Every day I examine myself on three points: whether in counseling others I have not been loyal; whether in intercourse with my friends I have not been faithful; and whether I have not repeated again and again and practiced the instructions of my teacher’.”<sup>27</sup> Confucian self-examination sometimes becomes so rigorous that it falls into excessive self-blaming and a kind of constant self-censorship by the rules of propriety (*li*).

However, as Tu Wei-Ming observed, the quest for self-realization or ultimate values to a Confucian self may not be consummated in a social

22 Mencius 7A.4: “反身而誠 樂莫大焉,” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 79.

23 *Analects* 7.27: “多聞 擇其善者而從之 多見而識之 知之次也.” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 32-33. Also 16:9.

24 cf. *Analects* 12.23. J. Legge translation of the terms. Cf. Legge, *Confucius*, 261.

25 cf. *Analects* 7.27. Also see 1.6: “When they have energy to spare after the performance of moral duties, they should use it to study literature and the arts,” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 20.

26 cf. *Analects* 4.17, 5.26, 7.21.

27 *Analects* 1.4: “曾子曰 五日三省五身 為人謨而不忠乎 與朋友交而不信乎 傳不習乎,” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 20.

context of performing rituals, but has profound psychological and religious implications. He writes:

A distinctive feature of Confucian ritualization is an ever-deepening and broadening awareness of the presence of the other in one's self-cultivation. This is perhaps the single most important reason that the Confucian idea of the self as a center of relationships is an open system. It is only through the continuous opening up of the self to others that the self can maintain a wholesome personal identity.<sup>28</sup>

Psycho-religious implications notwithstanding, the self-cultivation, self-realization, or self-transformation of a Confucian self, in principle, cannot take place outside of a socio-political context. The same is true even in a Neo-Confucian tradition that adds metaphysical and transcendental layers to the ancient Confucianism. Mere transcendental reflection or meditation will not complete the project of self-cultivation, even if the ultimate aim is to transcend the narrow bound and interest of the self to be one with the universe. Before achieving the Great Unity, the self, like the Hegelian spirit, must traverse "the matrices of human converse"<sup>29</sup> by being engaged in the rigorous action and discipline of mind and body, and the constant learning/practicing rules of propriety in everyday lives.

The fact that the matrices a Confucian self must traverse is not a plain, but a faulted field of hierarchical or graded human relations is what makes the Confucian project of self-cultivation a difficult case in regards to democratic ideals, and even brings it to a somewhat sharp dilemma. It is also where Dewey's ideas of individual sharply diverge from the ideas of his Confucian counterparts. On a political, and an economic level, if not necessarily on a philosophical level, modern democratic societies take the individual as a basic unit. Whoever the individual is, and whatever relation this person enjoys with other people, the individual person has, provided they have satisfied a certain minimum condition like being over a certain age, inalienable political and economic rights as well as duties. Individuals are the final locus points where rights and duties take their residence, if not their origins and intents, as Dewey put it.

By contrast, a Confucian individual outside of the relations that are regulated by the ideas of "three bonds" (*sangang* 三綱)<sup>30</sup> and five moral formula of basic human relationships (*wulun* 五倫)<sup>31</sup> finds little significance to his or her existence and has little means to achieve self-

28 Tu, *Confucian Thought*, 114. Tu, in various places, focuses on this aspect of Confucianism, especially when he interprets Confucianism in Mencian and Yang-mingian spirits.

29 Tu, *Confucian Thought*, 83.

30 They are the human relations that were taken to constitute the basic net of society, i.e., the relations of father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife. We don't find the concept of San-kang in neither Confucius nor Mencius. It is conceived that it appeared in the Han dynasty. cf. Whang, *Yongu Nonchong* 83.2: 93.

31 It is considered to have an origin in *Mencius* 3A:4. It formulates rules or concepts that govern basic human relationships; between father and son, there should be affection [*qin* 親]; between ruler and minister, there should be righteousness [*yi* 義]; between husband and wife, there should be attention to their separate functions [*bie* 別], between old and young, there should be a proper order [*xu* 序]; and between friends, there should be faithfulness [*xin* 信]. Translation from Chan, *A Source Book*, 69-70.

realization. A woman, for instance, must be in a marital state, even as a widow, before she makes any claim to rights and duties, and devotes herself to the task of self-cultivation. One must be in a familial or highly specified kind of relations of acquaintanceship without which one does not know what kind of rights or duty one has. The concept of rights or duty would become vague and empty if sought to be applied to a lone individual. Very often, rights and duties are shared by a group like a family clan, or by a group in the same hierarchical order, and awards or punishments also befall a group as a unit. In a Confucian society, family members sometimes take punishments in other members' stead.<sup>32</sup> Rights and duties, however, are not shared evenly by the members in a group. They are graded upon the ordering of the members in terms of age, sex, and the degree of consanguinity.

The reason why the vehement claims on equality in the ability to perform *ren* as the general principle of humanity run into conflicts with democratic ideals in the actual context of Confucian culture is that the concept of *ren* has never been formulated apart from more particularized concepts of *li* and *yi* (righteousness).<sup>33</sup> Despite the difficult problem of accurately translating Confucian concepts into English, *ren*, which has been variously rendered as "benevolence, charity, humanity, love, human-heartedness, and goodness,"<sup>34</sup> can be taken to be the highest moral value that the realization of other values like filial piety, loyalty, wisdom, etc., ultimately purports to manifest. While it is most conspicuous in Confucius that *ren* is characterized in terms of propriety, Mencius also maintains that the sincerity, righteousness, and impartial love as what which constitutes the core of *ren* are to be manifested in propriety. In Zhu Xi, *ren*, as the principle of love to produce moral qualities in men, includes *li*. And *li* becomes the principle of Heaven, as *ren* is the character of the mind of Heaven and Earth to produce things. Apart from *li* as the externalization of *ren*, we do not know the conditions or rules under which the concept of *ren* is applied. We only have the fragmentary examples of it evoked by Confucian thinkers evoked.

*Ren*, as providing the general idea of strongly a humanitarian moral value, is not necessarily confined to the social context of time-bound customs and mores. But *li*, as a concept of social relations, focuses on ritual rules concerning the ceremonies of coming of age, marriage, funeral and ancestral worship (*guanhun sangji* 冠婚喪祭). It also includes rules regulating everyday conduct toward people related to me such as parent, elder, superior, inferior, ruler, in-laws, friend, guest, and so on as well as ordinary actions like walking, eating, speaking, greeting, and clothing. In Korea, *li* was highly politicized to develop into the law of *li* that prescribed human conduct in nearly every situation to an almost unprecedented degree.

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32 In the Joseon Dynasty, the head of a family (father, husband, or first son) was punished when a woman in the family violated laws, like by going outside to meet men outside of family relations the extent of which was fixed by the law. And sometimes a son took punishment in his father's stead, and vice versa.

33 For the discussion of *ren* and its relation to other concepts, see Tu, *Philosophy East and West* 18: 29-39, *Philosophy East and West* 31: 45-54, and Cua, *Understanding the Chinese Mind*, 209-235.

34 Tu, *Philosophy East and West* 18: 31.

The establishment of *lixue* 禮學 in the early 17th century was not a mere contingency.

Obvious as it may be that the intent of following *li* was to pursue, by means of rituals and ideal human relationships, the way to the perfection of humanity and thereby to participate in the order of universe that *li* underlies, its excessive codification (not necessarily from exclusive political intentions) resulted, at least in part, in the suffocation of individual freedom and autonomy. If *li* were absolute, not spatio-temporally bound, truth, as it apparently intended to be, then the whole procedure of following *li* would be a quite efficient way of pursuing a moral life since it would spare individuals the painstaking procedure of decision-making. But *li* is susceptible to change in accordance with changes in the needs and the conditions of a society. Confucius cites the philosopher Yu's saying that to practice *li* is to establish harmony,<sup>35</sup> but seems to appeal to a more fundamental principle to determine what to follow when he says,

The linen cap is prescribed by the rules of ceremony (*li*) but nowadays a silk one is worn. It is economical and I follow the common practice. Bowing below the hall is prescribed by the rules of ceremony, but nowadays people bow after ascending the hall. This is arrogant, and I follow the practice of bowing below the hall though that is opposed to the common practice.<sup>36</sup>

Zhu Xi, in his annotation of the above phrase, cites Chengzi's saying that a superior man is right in following the common practice if it is not detrimental to righteousness (*yi*), and not right if it is.<sup>37</sup> However, unless we know that righteousness is determined independently of propriety, and unless we appeal to naive moral intuitionism, it seems gratuitous to appeal to righteousness as a criterion to determine which *li* to follow. Flexibility of the rules of propriety may contribute to preventing Confucianism from falling prey to outmoded ritualism on the one hand, but makes the status of *li* in Confucianism precarious and arbitrary on the other. What is worse is that it accordingly makes the concept of *ren* problematic, because *ren* is so heavily dependent upon *li* and *yi* as to be reciprocally defined in many occasions. In order for Confucianism to be more than a collection of moral customs and norms that can be adjusted upon varying human situations and thus more than a mere situational ethics with absurd metaphysical justifications, there must be some objective principle of *ren* as the principle of morality or humanity by which to determine the right *li* and even further to generate new *li* viable in the modern context.<sup>38</sup> Without it, Confucianism would very likely be trivialized as a system of trite old sayings not fit for the modern world.

35 *Analects* 1.12: “禮之用 和爲貴,” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 21.

36 *Analects* 9.3: “麻冕 禮也 今也純 儉 五從衆 拜下禮也 今拜乎上 泰也 雖違衆 五從下,” tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 35.

37 *Analects/The Doctrine of the Mean*, annotated by Zhu Xi, tr. Han, 192-193: “程子曰 君子處世 事之無害於義者 從俗可也 害於義 則不可從也。”

38 The “ritual disputes” in the 17th century Joseon dramatically shows how far the interpretation of *li* can quickly become arbitrary and contingent upon the whims and interests of the people involved in the absence of determining criteria.

What propriety aims to establish is the distinctions of names (*mingfen* 名分) and (political or non-political) orders in a society. The ruler must behave as a ruler, the subject as a subject, the husband as a husband, the wife as a wife, the father as a father,<sup>39</sup> and so on. It purports to determine how close or remote a relationship is, to make clear what is doubtful, to judge between sameness and difference, and to discriminate between right and wrong by laying out different rules and ways of conduct corresponding to fine distinctions in names and social orders. Underlying this is the conception that everything essentially has its own place and function, and that it is *li* which finds and fixes them. Without distinctions and grades in men and their (linguistic and non-linguistic) behavior, it is assumed, a society would become chaotic. Propriety must be practiced out of sincerity and whole-heartedness. One must internalize it so that even one's feeling and emotion be in complete agreement with it and thus one's practicing *li* comes about with as much ease as to appear natural.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, not only one's bodily movement, but one's feeling and emotion also are formed in direct proportion to those fine distinctions and grades. In contrast, *ren* as love or benevolence aims to transcend those distinctions and discriminations to be united with the way of Heaven. A man of *ren* is an idealized whole person who is in constant communal experience, and can be fully grown into a free and independent (but not isolated) democratic citizen with egalitarian awareness. Thus, a man of *ren* is put under constant stress in one's pursuit of self-realization, as the only way to achieve self-realization is to traverse the network of human relationships, relationships which are graded, sometimes hierarchically, according to kinship, friendship, and acquaintanceship under the name of *li*. For instance, one cannot be upright, according to Confucius, if one bears witness against one's father who committed misconduct, as one is in special relation of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) with one's parent.<sup>41</sup> But one could not be upright either, if one does not bear witness against the other's father who committed misconduct.

The concept of *li*, insofar as it is grounded in the gradation and the different treatment of people according to age, sex, the closeness of relationships and the degree of affection, is structured in such a way that hampers the achievement of *ren* as a concept of impartiality. Conflicts seem unavoidable, particularly when the two concepts are taken separately. On the other hand, since *li* is considered as regulating all the areas of human activity, private as well as public, in a Confucian culture, there is no way to circumvent *li* to achieve *ren*. Once *ren* is characterized exclusively in terms of *li*, however, conflicts would be avoided, though at the price of the trivialization of Confucianism I mentioned above. It is unlikely that this dilemma can easily be dissolved, not, at least, until there is a creative

39 cf. *Analects* 12.11, tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 39.

40 It is the state of mind Confucius achieved at the age of seventy. Confucius said, "At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles" (*Analects* 2.4, tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 22).

41 Cf. *Analects* 13.18, which reads: "The Duke of She told Confucius, 'In my country there is an upright man named Kung. When his father stole a sheep, he bore witness against him.' Confucius said, 'The upright men in my community are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this'." (tr. Chan, *A Source Book*, 41).

reconstruction of the concept of *ren* as the highest principle of morality.

I have examined the Confucian conception of self as a social being in comparison with Dewey's notion of individualism. By considering them in the light of each other, we can better understand both. The concept of Confucian self can be made clearer in Deweyan terms, while the philosophical import of Dewey's concepts can acquire deeper shades when balanced against Confucian terms. But, as I have argued, Confucian thought suffers from inner conflicts which bring about a dilemma and has yet to meet the challenge of making itself compatible with democratic ideals of equality and individual freedom. The ethico-religious aspects of Confucian self-cultivation and self-realization necessarily involve socio-political implications due to the fact that Confucian self-realization needs socio-political context. When Confucianism is considered in the modern socio-political context, the process of self-realization of a Confucian self must therefore be different from that which was employed in a more traditional society. This involves the reconstruction of *li* and *ren*, as the modes of human relationships have changed, and the traditional patriarchal family is no longer considered as a basic unit of a society or a model on which a democratic society can be based. One may advocate, on an ethico-religious level, for the significance of Confucianism in the modern world by championing a set of familial and communal values based on Confucian humanism. But it is not quite certain that even that much significance could be procured, as the private (morals and religions) and the public cannot, in general, be clearly demarcated. Not, at least, until a rational reconstruction of Confucianism has been made.

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## 關於儒學傳統和杜威思想中的 個人概念的比較研究

金 惠 淑

### 中文摘要

本論文從比較哲學的觀點論證了儒學傳統和美國實用主義傳統中“個人”所具有的意義和蘊意。儒學傳統中表現出各種思想的多樣化，但在關係和社會((易學)中看“個人”這一點有着相對的統一性。美國的實用主義思想尤其是杜威思想提出了和儒家思想相似的個人概念。本論文集中對這兩種傳統的相遇，分化以及異同點予以考察。本人認為，雖然在將個人看做社會存在這一點上，兩種思想邏輯有着驚人的相同之處，但是儒家在等級秩序(禮的秩序)中強調個人，而杜威在關係中強調的是認識個人自我存在這一理性因素，在此，兩者又有着鮮明的不同之處。儒家通過“仁”這一思想，強調的是為他人考慮、人際關係及社會性，而難以產生民主主義政治體制的原因就在於此。

**關鍵詞：**個人，社會，儒學，美國實用主義，杜威 (John Dewey)