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The Confucian Perception of Adulthood

ACCORDING TO THE CONFUCIAN *Book of Rites*, the “capping ceremony” (*kuan-li*) is performed on a man’s twentieth birthday and declares that he has come of age. But only after he has married and become a father in his thirties is he considered a fully participating member of society. His career as a scholar-official normally begins at forty. He is then considered mature and responsible. If all goes well, he reaches the apex of his public service at fifty, and he does not retire from it until he is well over seventy. The “capping ceremony” is also preceded by an equally elaborate process of maturation: education at home begins at six, sex differentiation in education at seven, etiquette at eight, arithmetic at nine, formal schooling at ten, and by thirteen the student will have studied music, poetry, dance, ritual, archery, and horsemanship.¹ Thus from childhood to old age the learning to be human never ceases.

Adulthood conceived in this way is not so much a state of attainment as a process of becoming. The initiation rite as a gateway to manhood does not feature prominently in Confucian symbolism. And the idea that one’s life on earth can and should be differentiated into discrete modes of existence and is, in essence, a preparation for an afterlife does not seem to have occurred in the Confucian tradition either. The emphasis instead is on the process of living itself. The maturation of a human being is viewed as an unfolding of humanity in the world. For without self-cultivation as a continuous effort to realize one’s humanity biological growth becomes meaningless. Adulthood, then, is “to become a person.” The present paper is intended as an exploration of the underlying structure of this claim.

Metaphor

Tseng Tzu, one of Confucius’ most respected disciples, envisioned the task of becoming a man as one of embarking on an endless journey with a heavy burden on one’s shoulders.

The true Knight of the Way [*shih*] must perforce be both broad-shouldered and stout of heart; his burden is heavy and he has far to go. For Humanity [*jen*] is the burden he has taken upon himself; and must we not grant that it is a heavy one to bear? Only with death does this journey end; then must we not grant that he has far to go?²

The image of being “on the way” is also present in Confucius’ comment on his best disciple, Yen Hui, whose premature death deeply agonized him: “Alas, I saw his constant advance. I never saw him stop in his progress.”³ Similarly, as the *Analects* records, once standing by a stream the Master was moved to remark, “Could one but go on and on like this, never ceasing day or night!”⁴ As many commentators have pointed out, the continuous flow of the water here symbolizes a ceaseless process of self-realization and is therefore an apt description of the Confucian understanding of the authentic way of being human.

Yet the Way, which is inseparable from the person who pursues it, is never perceived as an external path. Instead, it is assumed to be inherent in human nature and thus, as the *Doctrine of the Mean* clearly notes, cannot even for a moment be detached from it.⁵ To follow the Way, so conceived, is neither a rejection of, nor a departure from, one’s humanity. It is rather a fulfillment of it. Therefore, in a strict sense, a man does not follow the Way as a means to an end. Nor does he imitate the Way so that he can realize a specifiable destiny. The idea of achievement is not at all applicable to this mode of thinking. In fact, Confucius himself insisted that “the Way cannot make man great” and that “it is man who can make the Way great.”⁶ Understandably, in Confucian literature the imagery of *seeing* the Way is hardly used. The Way can be heard (presumably as an inner voice), obtained, and embodied, but it can never be found by casting our gaze outward.

The internality of the Way as an experienced presence is what accounts for much of the moral striving in Confucian self-cultivation. Since the Way is not shown as a norm that establishes a fixed pattern of behavior, a person cannot measure the success or failure of his conduct in terms of the degree of approximation to an external ideal. The Way is always near at hand, and the journey must be constantly renewed here and now. An often quoted dictum in the *Great Learning* simply reads: “If you can renovate yourself one day, then you can do so every day, and keep doing so day after day.” The instruction is not only to do what one ought to do but to “try at all times to do the utmost one can.”⁷ And furthermore, if one encounters difficulties, “do not complain against Heaven above or blame men below.”⁸ It is like the art of archery: “When the archer misses the center of the target, he turns around and seeks for the cause of failure within himself.”⁹ The Way, then, does not provide an ideal norm or a set of directives to be complied with. It functions as a governing perspective and a point of orientation.

The Confucians believe that ideally only those who steer the middle course can completely realize themselves and hence manifest the Way in its all-embracing fullness. But they are also aware that, although the course of the Mean is perfect, few people have been able to follow it consistently, “if just for a round month.” The seemingly common and direct path of self-cultivation is in practice extremely difficult to maintain. It was probably not merely for dramatic effect that Confucius is alleged to have said, “The empire, the states, and the families can be put to order. Ranks and emolument can be declined. A bare, naked weapon can be tramped upon. But the Mean cannot [easily] be attained.”¹⁰ Thus the pursuit of the middle course is much more demanding and significant than even the most outstanding demonstration of power, honor, or

valor. This may give one the impression that only those who can always pursue the due medium are the “true Knights of the Way.” But, having come to the realization that the quality of the Mean rarely exists, Confucius was particularly concerned about finding the “ardent” (*k’uang*) and the “aloof” (*chüan*). For “the ardent will advance and lay hold of the Way; the aloof will keep themselves from pursuing the wrong ways.”¹¹

The Way is, then, particularly open to those who have the inner strength to “get hold of it, grasp it firmly as if wearing it on his breast and never lose it”¹² and to those who are able to wait for the right moment to follow it. But it is more or less manifested in the lives and conduct of ordinary people as well. Even men and women of simple intelligence are in a sense witnesses of the Way.¹³ Only the so-called “hyperhonest villager” (*hsiang-yüan*) has little chance of manifesting it. Confucius’ distaste for this sort of person is shown in his characterization of him as “the enemy (or thief) of virtue.”¹⁴ The reason why Confucius was particularly disapproving of the hyperhonest villager is elaborated by Mencius as follows:

If you want to censure him, you cannot find anything; if you want to find fault with him, you cannot find anything either. He shares with others the practices of the day and is in harmony with the sordid world. He pursues such a policy and appears to be conscientious and faithful, and to show integrity in his conduct. He is liked by the multitude and is self-righteous. It is impossible to embark on the way of Yao and Shun [the Confucian Way] with such a man. Hence the name “enemy of virtue.”¹⁵

At first glance Confucius does seem unusually stringent toward the hyperhonest villager. One wonders what harm he has done merely because he believes that “[b]eing in this world, one must behave in a manner pleasing to this world.”¹⁶ After all, one of the primary Confucian concerns, also, is to bring peace and harmony to this world. Again, Mencius elaborates on how Confucius might have responded to our puzzlement:

I dislike what is specious. I dislike weeds for fear they might be confused with rice plant; I dislike flattery for fear it might be confused with what is right; I dislike glibness for fear it might be confused with the truthful; . . . I dislike the hyperhonest villager for fear he might be confused with the virtuous.¹⁷

The real problem with the hyperhonest villager is his total lack of a commitment to the Way. Despite his apparent compatibility with the established social norms, he is absolutely devoid of any “ambition” for self-improvement. His complacency, as a result, is no more than a reflection of a hollow and unreal personality.

The Knight of the Way, however, never ceases to “set his heart on the Way.” Nor does he relax his “firm grasp on virtue.” Indeed, he always endeavors to “rely on humanity and find recreation in the arts”¹⁸ so that he can broaden himself with “culture” (*wen*) and refine himself with “ritual” (*li*).¹⁹ His “ambition” is to become a “man of humanity” who, “wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent.”²⁰ His learning is “for the sake of himself” (*wei-chi*),²¹ and he does not regard

himself as an “instrument” (*ch’i*), for his mode of existence is to be an end rather than a tool for any external purpose.²² To be sure, this by no means implies that he somehow exemplifies the amateur ideal of “doing his own thing” for love alone. As we shall see, he is as much motivated by a duty-consciousness²³ as by an aesthetic need for self-perfection.

In fact, no matter how hard he works and how much distance he covers, a true man is, as it were, all the time “on the Way.” The aforementioned Tseng Tzu was gravely serious when he said that “only with death does this journey end.” Even the sigh of relief he uttered with his dying words—“I feel now that whatever may betide I have got through safely”—was preceded by a verse from the *Book of Odes*:

In fear and trembling,
With caution and care,
As though on the brink of a chasm,
As though treading thin ice.²⁴

Approach

The Way as a root metaphor or basic analogy is vitally important for understanding the Confucian concept of man, an understanding necessary for an appreciation of the Confucian idea of adulthood. Since the process of maturation is conceived as a continuous effort toward self-realization, the creative development of a person depends as much upon a sense of inner direction as upon a prior knowledge of the established social norms. For a person to manifest his humanity, it is not enough simply to model himself on the proper ways of life and conduct approved by society. He must learn to control his own course through experience and furnish it with contents shaped by his concrete action. And as the Way cannot be fully mapped out in advance, he must, with a sense of discovery, undergo a dynamic process of self-transformation in order to comport with it.²⁵ The Way, then, is always a way of “becoming” (*ch’eng*).

Understandably, the Confucian term for adulthood is *ch’eng-jen*, which literally means one who has *become* a person. Since the word *ch’eng*, like many other Chinese characters, is both a noun and a verb, the former signifying a state of completion and the latter a process of development, it is not far-fetched to understand the *ch’eng-jen* basically as one who has *gone far* toward a fully developed humanity. The notion of *ch’eng-jen* thus denotes not merely a stage of life but a many-sided manifestation of man’s creative adaptation to the inevitable process of aging, a proven ability to mature further, as well as an obvious sign of maturity itself. The assumption is that the person who “has the Way” (*yu-tao*) has not only experiential knowledge of the Way but the wisdom and strength to lead the Way.

Strictly speaking, if adulthood means the process of becoming a person and an adult means not only a mature person but also a person capable of further maturing, it is difficult to imagine in such a context how “adulthood” could merely signify a culminating point of “adolescence.” The idea of adolescence as a state of growing up, presumably from puberty to maturity, is alien to the Confucian view of life. For one thing, maturity can never be achieved in the sense of suddenly enveloping a hitherto incom-

prehensible mode of existence. Since the process of aging begins with birth, it does not make much sense to characterize a particular stage of human life as “growing up.” It is one thing to underscore a distinctive pattern of physical maturation in youth and quite another to define the process of becoming human in terms of a period of nine to eleven years of alleged transition.

However, this should by no means suggest that the distinction between youth and manhood is absent in Confucian thought. It is only that attention is not so sharply focused on a “between” period, alleged to be characterized by mental and emotional instability as well as by other ingratiating attributes associated with this early stage of life. Since, in Confucianism, maturation is perceived mainly in terms of self-cultivation, human growth as a holistic process of realizing that which is thought to be the authentic human nature begins in early childhood and does not end even with old age. Despite the critical quality of adolescence in both the “nature” and “art” of maturing, it is by and large equal in importance to other vital periods of life history. By implication, although old age must be recognized as a delicate situation and at times even confronted as a difficult problem, it is intrinsically valuable as a concluding chapter in man’s self-realization.

Against this background, the tripartite division of “youth” (*shao*), “manhood” (*chuang*), and “old age” (*lao*) in the *Analects* must be taken as denoting three equally significant periods of human life and thus three integral aspects of adulthood (which, to reiterate an early point, means the state of being well on the way to becoming a fully realized person). The three things against which a Knight of the Way must, as Confucius recommended, be on his guard can therefore be seen as an integrated teaching on adulthood:

In his youth, before his blood and vital humors have settled down, he is on his guard against lust. Having reached his prime, when the blood and vital humors have finally hardened, he is on his guard against strife. Having reached old age, when the blood and vital humors are already decaying, he is on his guard against avarice.²⁶

The young adult should be on his guard against excessive indulgence in sex not so much because of an aversion toward sexual activity itself as because of the detrimental effect it is thought to have on one’s mental as well as physical health. The physiological theories underlying this consideration, which are still prevalent in China, hold that a careful preservation of one’s “blood and vital humors” at this juncture of maturation is a prerequisite for a wholesome growth. The development of a personality, like the planting of crops, must not be hurried. The story of the farmer of Sung in *Mencius* whose over-zealousness led him to help his crops grow by artificially pulling up seedlings is a vivid description of how harmful imposition can frustrate the natural process of aging.²⁷ Just as unnecessary assistance withers the crops, “lust’s effect,” far from comforting to the body and mind, “is tempest after sun.”

Similarly, strife is threatening to true manhood because the energy available for personal development and public service is misdirected. To be sure, Confucius encouraged moral striving. And the reason why he was particularly pleased to teach the “ardent” is precisely because the latter have a strong will to forge ahead.²⁸ But com-

petitiveness, which is what “strife” means in this connection, is a clear demonstration that the way of being human is here pursued not for the sake of self-realization but “for the sake of the others” (*wei-jen*).²⁹ So long as one’s self-image is mainly dependent upon the external responses of others, one’s inner direction will be lost. As a result, the ability to “endure adversity” or “enjoy prosperity” for long will also be weakened.³⁰ Despite the fact that physically one’s “blood and vital humors have finally hardened,” one is not necessarily strong in the sense of being truly “steadfast” (*kang*). In fact, steadfastness in the Confucian sense means the ability to remain unaffected by external influences in determining how one is to pursue and manifest the Way.³¹

If strife, reflecting a profound inner uncertainty, becomes a kind of impulsive aggressiveness, “avarice” in old age seems to indicate a defensive attachment to what one has already gained. The Chinese character *te* in this particular context also suggests “possessiveness.” The remark in the *Analects* may have been the source of a widely circulated proverb which characterizes the small-minded person as one who is “distressed in mind trying to get more, and then troubled lest he lose it.” A possessive old man may not present any serious threat to society. But from the viewpoint of self-realization, if one is overpowered by possessiveness in old age, the possibility for a safe and sound passage in the last phase of one’s “lifelong” journey will be slim. Otherwise, old age may truly be the fruition of one’s earnest endeavor to learn to be human through self-effort. Thus, like lust in youth and strife in manhood, the real danger of avarice lies in its detrimental effect on what ought to be a ceaseless process of realizing full humanity. In a deeper sense, since one of the most persistent attachments is to life itself, the art of dying is undoubtedly the principal challenge in old age. Unless one can peacefully accept the termination of one’s life as a matter of fact, one still somehow falls short of a successful completion. This may have been the reason why a great many biographies of Confucian scholar-officials contain detailed descriptions of the last moments of their lives.

The common belief that, under the influence of Confucian thought, Chinese culture has developed a special respect for old age needs some explanation. Notwithstanding gerontocratic tendencies in Chinese history, old age in itself commands little admiration. Respect for the old is actually based on the assumption that, in the long and unavoidable journey of self-improvement, an old man ought to have forged way ahead in furnishing his life with inspiring contents. Ideally, therefore, being advanced in age is a sign of wisdom and resourcefulness as well as of experience and perseverance. But this hardly implies that in practice seniority of age automatically becomes an undisputable value. Simply “being old and not dying” does not get one very far. The manner in which Confucius approached an old man in the *Analects* may appear shockingly un-Confucian on the surface, but it is consistent with his overarching concerns:

Yüan Jang [an unmannerly old man of Confucius’ acquaintance] sat waiting for the Master in a sprawling position. The Master said to him, “In youth, not humble as befits a junior; in manhood, doing nothing worthy of being handed down. And merely to live on, getting older and older, is to be a useless pest.” With this he hit him on the shank with his staff.³²

Confucius' candid attitude toward Yüan Jang, by which many a commentator including Arthur Waley has been deeply perplexed,³³ is not at all inconceivable in light of the Confucian belief that old age, as a more matured manifestation of adulthood, is itself still "on the way." It is perhaps also in this sense that the Master instructed his followers to respect the young: "How do you know that they will not one day be all that you are now?" And since the emphasis is on actual performance as well as on promise of moral growth, Confucius continued, "[Only] if a man has reached forty or fifty and nothing has been heard of him, then I grant there is no need to respect him."³⁴ It would be misleading to suppose, however, that one's moral growth can significantly surpass one's physical maturation. An attempt to get on quickly without proper cultivation merely assumes the form rather than the content of maturity. A youth whom Confucius employed to carry messages is a case in point. When a friend commented that he seemed to have made great progress, the Master said, "I observe that he is fond of occupying the seat of a *full-grown man*; I observe that he walks shoulder to shoulder with his elders. He is not one who is seeking to make progress *in learning*. He wishes quickly to become a man."³⁵

It should be noted in this connection that learning (*hsüeh*) in the tradition of Confucian education is broadly defined to include not only intellectual and ethical growth but the development of the body as well. Actually the involvement of the body is such an integral part of the Confucian ideal of learning that the Confucian Way itself has been characterized by the Neo-Confucians as "the learning of the body and mind" (*shen-hsin chih chiao*). Indeed, each of the "six arts" (*liu-i*) that constitute the core of Confucian teaching involves the total participation of the body. Although only archery and charioteering are intended to be physical exercises, ritual and music both require the harmonization of bodily movements. Even in calligraphy and arithmetic, the importance of practice in the sense of acquiring an experiential understanding of the basic skills is always emphasized. One might even say that it is precisely in this sense that the Neo-Confucian masters often instruct their students to "embody" the Way. Therefore, the one who seeks to make progress in learning must have the courage and patience to wait for the "ripening of humanity" (*jen-shu*). After all, "only when the year grows cold do we see that the pine and cypress are the last to fade";³⁶ likewise, human self-realization depends much upon what may be called one's staying power.

The idea that youth, manhood, and old age are three inseparable dimensions of adulthood is compatible with the Confucian belief that a fully developed person should first be incited by "poetry," then established by "ritual," and finally perfected by "music."³⁷ It may not be far-fetched to suggest that adulthood, as a process of becoming, can be understood as a continuous "ritualization" from "poetry" to "music."

The poetic state, so to speak, symbolizes the eagerness and excitement of the young adult who has already developed an inner sense of direction. The technical term used to designate this kind of commitment is *li-chih*, which literally means "to establish one's will." The absolute necessity of an existential decision, not only as a commencement but also as an affirmation to be continuously reenacted, is taken for granted in Confucian literature. Thus, the Master insisted, "Only one who bursts with eagerness do I instruct; only one who bubbles with excitement, do I enlighten."³⁸ In a strict sense, unless the young adult is personally motivated to embark on the Way, no teacher can

force him to pursue it. Having been fully aware that, especially for the young, “the desire to build up [one’s] moral power is never as strong as sexual desire,”³⁹ Confucius recommended the study of poetry as a guide for harmonizing basic emotions. He felt that the odes of the classical tradition can, among other things, “serve to stimulate the mind,” “be used for purposes of self-contemplation,” “teach the art of sociality,” and “show how to regulate feelings of resentment.” Through a careful reading of them, he further maintained, not only “the more immediate duty of serving one’s father and the remoter one of serving one’s prince” can be learned, even knowledge about natural phenomena can also be acquired.⁴⁰ On the other hand, he who does not have any acquaintance with the odes is “as though he stood with his face pressed against a wall!”⁴¹ In such a situation, he can hardly advance a step toward self-realization. Poetry then marks an initial but critical step on the Way.

Similarly, ritual, symbolizing the state of manhood, is both a structure and a movement whereby one’s character as a mature person is established. Like the tradition of the *Odes*, it involves a set of highly integrated rules of propriety which the young adult must learn in order to become a full participating member of society. Also, like poetry, it harmonizes as well as directs human emotions toward a socially recognizable mode of expression. Since a person in the Confucian sense is always a center of relationships rather than an *individual* complete in himself and separable from others, the structure and movement by which he expresses himself in the context of human-relatedness becomes a defining characteristic of his humanity. Ritualization so conceived, far from being depersonalizing, is a necessary way of learning to be human. However, the order of priority as specified by Confucius clearly indicates that ritual itself must also be based on human feelings: “If a man is not humane [*jen*], what can he have to do with ritual?”⁴² Ideally ritualization should be in perfect accord with humanization. And ritual is not thought to be a social imposition upon nature but a refinement of nature according to well articulated cultural values. It is perhaps in this sense that Confucius maintained that only through ritual can those human feelings that exhibit basic virtues be properly manifested:

Respectfulness without ritual becomes laborious bustle; carefulness without ritual becomes timidity; boldness without ritual becomes turbulence; straightforwardness without ritual becomes rudeness.⁴³

It is also in this sense that the Master felt he could finally talk about the real meanings of the odes with Tzu-hsia, because this disciple had come to the realization that just as the art of laying on the colors follows the preparation of the plain ground, so is ritual subsequent to poetry.⁴⁴

Example

The perception of adulthood as a continuous development from poetry to music is an idealized way of conceptualizing the process of growing up in accordance with the middle path. A close approximation to this pattern of maturation is certainly the case of Confucius himself. Yet, although the *Analects* does provide a good example of this, it has never been taken as a norm in the Confucian tradition. For the process of self-real-

ization is so dependent upon one's particular circumstances that it is pointless to set up one concrete experience as the single most important archetype. The Confucian Way, in a strict sense, is not one and the same as the way of Confucius. Strictly speaking, even the word "Confucianist" is a misnomer because the follower of the Confucian Way does not accept the Master's life and conduct as revealed truth; nor does he believe that Confucius actually attained the highest possible level of human perfection. His ultimate concern, then, is not to become a Confucianist but to become a genuine human being, a sage. To be sure, Confucius the symbol has been honored as the complete sage for more than two thousand years. But this by no means suggests that Confucius the person has ever been celebrated as the only true interpreter of the Human Way (*jen-tao*). In fact, Confucius never claimed that he had himself attained sagehood. The way of Confucius therefore should be taken mainly as a standard of inspiration:

At fifteen I set my heart upon learning.
 At thirty I established myself [in accordance with ritual].
 At forty I no longer had perplexities.
 At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven.
 At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard.
 At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without
 transgressing the boundaries of right.⁴⁵

"Learning" (*hsüeh*) was to Confucius much more than the acquisition of empirical knowledge; nor was it simply a method of internalizing the proper manner of behavior in society. It was the thing he did as a conscious human being. Through learning, which means through an ever deepening personal knowledge about how to be human, he transformed his life into a meaningful existence. Learning in this particular association was so much a cherished idea that Confucius almost refused to grant anyone else the characterization of being "given to learning": "In a hamlet of ten houses you may be sure of finding someone quite as loyal and true to his word as I. But I doubt if you would find anyone with such a love of learning."⁴⁶ And he admitted that, after the death of his best disciple, no students of his were really "given to learning."⁴⁷ Confucius was absolutely serious about his self-image as a devoted learner; once after a disciple reported that he had been at a loss to describe his Master to a questioner, Confucius said, "Why didn't you say that I am a person who forgets his food when engaged in vigorous pursuit [of learning], is so happy as to forget his worries, and is not aware that old age is coming on?"⁴⁸

If the setting of his heart upon learning at fifteen signifies the opening of a new and continuous process of intellectual and moral growth, the establishment of his character in accordance with ritual at thirty further suggests a more refined expression of maturity. As ritual involves a network of human relations, self-establishment in this connection specifically points to the responsibility one assumes in reference to a variety of primordial ties. Concerning the major dyadic relationships, Confucius is alleged to have said that he had not been able to accomplish any of them:

To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me: that I have not been able to do.
 To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me: that I have not been able

to do. To serve my elder brothers as I would expect my younger brothers to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To be the first to treat friends as I would expect them to treat me: that I have not been able to do.⁴⁹

Confucius' self-criticism, far from being simply a heuristic device, indicates that in assuming ordinary responsibilities there is bound to be room for improvement. Loyalty, filiality, brotherhood, and friendship are common virtues, but the processes of ritualization through which they can be fully realized are long and subtle. Maturity in this sense means both the ability to manifest virtues like these properly and the awareness that one must never cease to make further effort to establish oneself in ritual. The mature person is therefore "earnest and genuine."⁵⁰ For he knows that the burden is heavy and the journey is long for the realization of true humanity.

This duty-consciousness is predicated on the Confucian golden rule: "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you."⁵¹ The golden rule is always negatively stated because the emphasis is on self-cultivation. Given the centrality of one's own quest for personal knowledge, perhaps it is neither necessary nor desirable to impose upon others what one believes to be right for oneself. Underlying the golden rule, then, is the premise that "conscientiousness [*chung*] and altruism [*shu*] are not far from the Way."⁵² The inner demand for being truthful to one's humane self is inseparable from the social need to care for others; and the learning for self-realization is also the learning for harmonizing human relations. The real threat to a genuine manifestation of the humane self is not society but one's own selfish desires. Altruism is thus not a consequence of conscientiousness but its inalienable complement. The positive character of this Confucian doctrine is implicit in the assertion that the Way is pursued not by insisting upon its abstract universality but by assuring that which is best for one's humane self, the self that forms a community with others.

As the transformation from a commitment to learning in the poetic state to an assumption of social responsibilities in the ritual state symbolizes Confucius' maturation as a young adult, "no longer having perplexities" symbolizes Confucius' disposition in the middle years. "No perplexities" first suggests an independence of mind. His will had by then become so firmly set on the Way that wealth and honor were to him like "floating clouds"⁵³ with no danger of casting any shadow on his mind. This ability to remain disinterested, however, was hardly a recoil from social involvement. It was a form of self-possession, suggesting inner strength and repose: "I have listened in silence and noted what was said. I have never grown tired of learning nor wearied of teaching others what I have learned—these are just natural with me."⁵⁴ The unperturbed mind, to borrow from Mencius, is the resultant effect of "righteous deeds."⁵⁵ It is a wisdom which, despite active participation in society, perceives the total situation clearly. Thus, only "the wise have no perplexities."⁵⁶

Yet the unperturbed adult is not only intellectually alert but emotionally stable and strong. His independence of mind is as much an indication of moral courage as a sign of wisdom. When Tzu-lu asked what constituted "a complete man" (a truly mature person), Confucius said:

If anyone had the wisdom of Tsang Wu-chung, the uncovetousness of Meng Kung-ch'o, the valor of P'ien Chuang-tzu, and the artistic talents of Jan Ch'iu, and graced these vir-

tues by the cultivation of ritual and music, then indeed I think we might call him “a complete man.”

However, realizing that what he had described was too much an ideal for his disciple to emulate, he continued with Tzu-lu, who was noted for his moral courage, particularly in mind:

But perhaps today we need not ask all this of the complete man. The man, who in the view of gain thinks of righteousness; who in the view of danger is prepared to give up his life; and who does not forget an old agreement however far back it extends—such a man may be considered “a complete man.”⁵⁷

If “beyond perplexities” signifies the wisdom and courage of manhood, “knowing the Mandate of Heaven” points to an even more sophisticated frame of mind in which the coming of old age is confronted squarely both as an inevitable process of maturation and as a great promise of reconciliation. Indeed, the meaning of the Mandate of Heaven is twofold. It connotes the limitation of one’s own fate as well as the fulfillment of a “transcendent” command. At fifty Confucius had experienced many hardships in life, among which the deaths of several of his best disciples and the repeated failures of his hope to set the world in order must have been especially agonizing. By then Confucius had become acutely aware of the inescapable limitation of human efforts to exert lasting influence on the brute realities of life. His personal encounters with dehumanizing forces in social conflicts and in fiercely contested political arenas had totally frustrated his “dream” of returning to the great peace of the Chou dynasty. As his advice and protests time and again fell upon heedless ears, he felt that his alienation from the world was complete: “Only Heaven knows me!”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as a confirmed humanist, he refused to forsake the world and herd with birds and beasts: “If I am not to be a man among other men, then what am I to be? If the Way prevailed under Heaven, I should not be trying to alter things.”⁵⁹ As he was approaching old age he felt more strongly the tension between a profound sense of the finitude in man and an equally profound belief in the perfectibility of human nature. Yet, his own choice of action was clear: recognizing that what he could do to set the world in order was extremely limited, still he could not but do it.

“Knowing the Mandate of Heaven” can therefore be conceived as an expression of Confucius’ spiritual crisis. A distinctive character of it is a deeply felt sense of mission. Despite the bitterness of his lot, his concern for the human world became even greater. To be sure, once he conveyed to Tzu-kung his wish not to say anything. When the disciple wondered how the Way could be revealed if the Master chose to remain silent, Confucius responded, “Heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their course thereby, the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby. Heaven does no speaking!”⁶⁰ Yet Confucius’ tacit understanding of the Mandate of Heaven is not a sign of passivity but of total commitment, a positive effort to carry out a lifelong task. In fact, he made it clear that the Mandate of Heaven is not an object of speculation but a thing to be feared and respected.⁶¹ To know the Mandate of Heaven is therefore more than an attainment of comprehension. When Confucius’ life was seriously threatened by a military officer in the state of Sung, when he had reached the age of fifty-nine, he

is recorded to have said, "Heaven produced the virtue that is in me; what can Huan T'ui do to me?"⁶² This sense of being chosen to fulfill a transcendent command is further evidenced by another incident which had happened three years previously:

When Confucius was in personal danger in K'uang, he said, "Since the death of King Wen, is not the course of culture [*wen*] in my keeping? If it had been the will of Heaven to destroy this culture, it would not have been given to a mortal [like me]. But if it is the will of Heaven that this culture should not perish, what can the people of K'uang do to me?"⁶³

Against this background, Confucius' self-definition as a transmitter rather than a maker⁶⁴ assumes a shape of meaning seldom understood and appreciated by students of Chinese thought. A transmitter is tradition-bound only in the sense that for the sake of self-knowledge he never ceases to learn from the past. To him, the value of history is judged not only by its usefulness and relevance to the present but also by its uninterrupted affirmation of the authentic possibility of humanness in the world. He does not assume the role of a maker, not because he fails to recognize the power of creativity but because by a conscious choice he refuses to cut himself off from the humanizing processes that have significantly contributed to his own maturation. In fact, as a transmitter, he continuously renews himself by delving deeply into the sources of his chosen heritage. His respect for the ancients does not lead him to a glorification of the past. Rather, his intention is to make sure that the humanity of the former sages always remains a felt presence in the world. His mission, then, is to assure cultural continuity through personal knowledge. In a deeper sense, Confucius' unqualified dedication to the transmission of what has for centuries been called the Sagely Way is not at all in conflict with his acute awareness of the finitude in man. Thus, independence of mind, suggesting both wisdom and courage, is now further refined. To know one's limitation, instead of inhibiting one's determination to forge ahead, actually enhances one's commitment to action. And one's sense of mission, far from suggesting hubris, is based upon a realistic appraisal of one's circumscription as well as one's inner strength. The encroachment of old age seems to have given another dimension to Confucius' adulthood.

"I was at ease with whatever I heard" suggests receptivity. The art of listening, especially as contrasted with that of seeing, is neither aggressive nor possessive. It is an affirmation of the world in a spirit of detachment. For it manifests maternal virtues of caring, forgiving, and accepting without at the same time exhibiting an unexamined attachment to a love object. It seems that by then Confucius' inner demand to change the world had been transformed into a silent appreciation of it. In the words of a twelfth-century commentator, "when sound enters, the mind opens up without rejection or resistance; as the art of knowing has reached its ultimate perfection, the mind can have it without reflection."⁶⁵ This penetrating responsiveness of the mind was surely the result of a long and strenuous self-examination. Understandably, Confucius, as depicted by his students, had succeeded in freeing himself from four defects of the mind: opinionatedness, dogmatism, obstinacy, and egoism.⁶⁶ It is vitally important to

note, however, that the spiritual “carefreeness” of Confucius at sixty implies neither eremitism nor asceticism. Rather, it symbolizes self-realization through the experience of unconflicted continuity with the world in all its aspects. The Master did say, “In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content!”⁶⁷ But the Way can never be heard by leaving the world. Indeed, the true peace of mind is not attained by deliverance from, but by participating in, the world. And only those who are really in the world are on the Way and thus have a chance of hearing the Way.

“I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing the boundaries of right” implies harmony. This last phase of Confucius’ adulthood seems to symbolize the final fruition of a long process of maturation. The commitment to learning at fifteen, the establishment of the self in ritual at thirty, the attainment of an unperturbed mind at forty, the knowledge of the will of Heaven at fifty, and the receptive appreciation of the world at sixty all converged, as it were, into a new state of realization. As Mencius suggested that “the great man does not lose his childlike heart,”⁶⁸ the joy of unrestrained freedom in the septuagenary Confucius seems to have been an artistically cultivated spontaneity, a second childhood in old age. “Poetry” and “ritual” are no longer fitting descriptions; the degree of integration characterized by a harmonization of what one is and what one ought to be can now be better understood in the symbolism of music as performed in Lu, Confucius’ native state: “[I]t began with a strict unison. Soon the musicians were given more liberty; but the tone remained harmonious, brilliant, consistent, right on till the close.”⁶⁹ The closing with “jade tubes” which produce a deep, euphonic sound is, in Mencius’ words, “the concern of a sage.”⁷⁰ Only then can we say that the Way is heard and even death is welcome

However, as already mentioned, the example of Confucius’ adulthood does not serve as an absolute norm but as a standard of inspiration in the Confucian tradition. Actually the Master never instructed his students to follow him in order to find the Way. Instead, he inspired them to pursue the Way by realizing humanity—or adulthood, if you will—in themselves. His real strength as an exemplary teacher then came from a persuasive power which, in the words of his admirers, was as gentle and refreshing as the spring breezes. Yen Hui, who died in his early thirties, never attained the level of adulthood his Master was confident he could have reached, but his description of the Confucian Way is worth quoting:

The more I strain my gaze upward toward it, the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front; but suddenly it is behind. Step by step the Master lures me on. He has broadened me with culture, restrained me with ritual. Even if I wanted to stop, I could not. Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing sharp and clear. Yet though I long to pursue it, I can find no way of getting to it at all.⁷¹

Even among Confucius’ closest disciples, the paths of self-realization are varied. Between Yen Hui’s premature death and Tseng Tzu’s longevity, there are numerous manifestations of adulthood. The case of Confucius is but one of them. It is therefore conceivable that a person in his eighties or nineties may be able to advance further on

the Way than Confucius had in his seventies. It is also conceivable that people under new circumstances may choose to pursue the Way in a mode which differs significantly from what traditionally has been sanctioned as authentically Confucian. After all, from the Confucian perspective, the approaches to sagehood are as many as there are sages. And by implication, although adulthood can be recognized, it can never be defined.

REFERENCES

- ¹See the "Nei-che" chapter in *Li-chi* (1815 edition), 28:20a-21b.
- ²*Analects*, 8:7. See Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (London, 1938), p. 134. Also cf. Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, 1969), p. 33, and James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects in The Chinese Classics* (7 vols.; Hong Kong, 1966; reprint), I, 210-11. For an inspiring discussion on the imagery of the Way in the *Analects*, see Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* (New York, 1972), pp. 18-36.
- ³*Analects*, 9:20.
- ⁴*Analects*, 9:16. See Waley, p. 142. As Waley points out, the extensive discussion on the metaphor of the water in *Mencius* (IVB:18) also addresses itself to the same idea.
- ⁵*Chung-yung*, I:1.
- ⁶*Analects*, 15:28. See Chan, p. 15.
- ⁷*Ta-hsüeh*, II. See Chan, p. 87.
- ⁸*Analects*, 14:37. The same passage is also found in *Chung-yung*, XIB:3. See Chan, p. 101.
- ⁹*Chung-yung*, XIV:5. See Chan, p. 102.
- ¹⁰*Chung-yung*, IX. See Chan, p. 99.
- ¹¹*Analects*, 13:21.
- ¹²*Chung-yung*, XIII. See Chan, p. 99.
- ¹³*Chung-yung*, XII:1-2.
- ¹⁴*Analects*, 17:13.
- ¹⁵*Mencius*, VIIB:37. See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Penguin Classics, 1970), p. 203.
- ¹⁶Lau, p. 203.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.* The term *hsiang-yuan* is rendered by Lau as "village honest man."
- ¹⁸*Analects*, 7:6.
- ¹⁹*Analects*, 9:10.
- ²⁰*Analects*, 6:28. See Chan, p. 31.
- ²¹*Analects*, 14:25.
- ²²*Analects*, 2:12.
- ²³"Duty-consciousness" is here contrasted with "rights-consciousness." While the latter emphasizes one's legitimate claims, the former is concerned about the moral imperative, a sense of commitment, completely independent of outside influence.
- ²⁴*Analects*, 8:3. See Waley, p. 133. A different version of the poem is found in James Legge, trans., *She-king (Book of Poetry)*, in *Chinese Classics*, IV, pt. 2, 335.
- ²⁵For a methodological discussion on this, see A. S. Cua, "Confucian Vision and Experience of the World," *Philosophy East and West*, XXV, no. 3 (July, 1975), 327-28.
- ²⁶*Analects*, 16:7. See Waley, pp. 205-06.
- ²⁷*Mencius*, IIA:2, sec. 16.
- ²⁸*Analects*, 13:21.
- ²⁹*Analects*, 14:25.
- ³⁰*Analects*, 4:2. See Waley, p. 102.
- ³¹*Analects*, 5:10.
- ³²*Analects*, 14:46. See Waley, p. 192.
- ³³Waley did not believe that Confucius could have been so rude to an old man; and so he arbitrarily decided that Yüan Jang was in fact a young boy, although he was fully aware that his view contradicted virtually all traditional commentaries. See Waley, p. 192, n. 3. Legge did accept that Yüan Jang was an old man, but he also felt that Confucius' candid remarks were quite unusual. For his apologetic comments, see Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects*, pp. 292-93, n. 46.

³⁴*Analects*, 9:22. See Waley, p. 143.

³⁵*Analects*, 14:47. See Legge, p. 293.

³⁶*Analects*, 9:27. See Waley, p. 144. I am indebted to Joan Erikson for calling my attention to this important dimension of Confucian education.

³⁷*Analects*, 8:8.

³⁸*Analects*, 7:8. See Waley, p. 124.

³⁹*Analects*, 9:17. See Waley, p. 142.

⁴⁰*Analects*, 17:9. See Legge, p. 323.

⁴¹*Analects*, 17:10. See Waley, p. 212.

⁴²*Analects*, 3:3.

⁴³*Analects*, 8:2. See Legge, p. 208. *Li* is rendered by Legge as "rules of propriety."

⁴⁴*Analects*, 3:8.

⁴⁵*Analects*, 2:4.

⁴⁶*Analects*, 5:27. See Waley, p. 114.

⁴⁷*Analects*, 6:2; 11:6.

⁴⁸*Analects*, 7:18. See Chan, p. 32. It seems clear that the "something" "in vigorous pursuit of something" refers to "learning."

⁴⁹*Chung-yung*, XIII:4. See Chan, p. 101. This statement seems incompatible with Confucius' remark, "I can claim that at Court I have duly served the Duke and his office; at home, my father and elder brother. As regards matters of mourning, I am conscious of no neglect, nor have I ever been overcome with wine. Concerning these things at any rate my mind is quite at rest." (*Analects*, 9:15; Waley, p. 144.) But the apparent contradiction between the two views can easily be resolved, if the whole matter is understood as involving different levels of self-cultivation. Surely, Confucius did not consider himself a failure in carrying out the basic requirements of loyalty and filiality. However, neither was he satisfied with what he was able to accomplish. Although his mind was quite at rest, his effort to improve himself remained persistent.

⁵⁰*Chung-yung*, XIII:3.

⁵¹*Analects*, 15:23. Also see *Chung-yung*, XIII:3.

⁵²*Chung-yung*, XIII:3.

⁵³*Analects*, 7:15. The entire statement reads: "He who seeks only coarse food to eat, water to drink, and bent arm for pillow will without looking for it find happiness to boot. Any thought of accepting wealth and rank by means that I know to be wrong is as remote from me as the clouds that float above." See Waley, p. 126.

⁵⁴*Analects*, 7:2. See Waley, p. 123, with minor modifications.

⁵⁵*Mencius*, IIA:2, sec. 15.

⁵⁶*Analects*, 9:28; 14:30.

⁵⁷*Analects*, 14:13. See Waley, p. 183, for the first part and Legge, pp. 279-80, for the second part. It should be noted that the term *ch'eng-jen*, rendered by Waley as "a perfect man," is also the term for "adult" or "adulthood."

⁵⁸*Analects*, 14:37.

⁵⁹*Analects*, 18:6. See Waley, p. 220.

⁶⁰*Analects*, 17:19. See Waley, p. 214.

⁶¹*Analects*, 16:8.

⁶²*Analects*, 7:22. See Chan, p. 32.

⁶³*Analects*, 9:5. See Chan, p. 35.

⁶⁴*Analects*, 7:1.

⁶⁵See Chu Hsi's commentary on the *Analects*, in *Ssu-shu chi-chu* (Taipei, 1952; reprint), p. 7.

⁶⁶*Analects*, 9:4.

⁶⁷*Analects*, 4:8. See Waley, p. 103.

⁶⁸*Mencius*, IVB:12.

⁶⁹*Analects*, 3:23.

⁷⁰*Mencius*, VB:1. See Lau, p. 150.

⁷¹*Analects*, 9:10. See Waley, p. 140.