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Further Thoughts

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Having prepared a general statement on East Asian thought as a background paper for the Workshop and having participated in the discussions of its relevance to a critical examination of the “biological foundations of morality,” I propose to offer in retrospect, especially in the light of Clifford Geertz’s thought-provoking comments on my presentation, some observations that may have a direct bearing on the psychological and philosophical issues raised in our joint endeavor. For expediency, I would call our attention to the thought of Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529), which is said to have combined the wisdom of Ch’an Buddhism and the esthetic sensitivity of Taoism with the humanist concerns of Confucianism. This may help us to focus more sharply on the salient features of the so-called Three Teachings. To begin, it should be remarked that Yang-ming, hailed as a most original and influential thinker in premodern China, was a distinguished scholar-official who consciously and conscientiously put into practice his metaphysical vision and demonstrated through his own personal spiritual development the beliefs he held. Indeed, his life history was an exemplification of the “unity of knowledge and action” idea which he advocated as a defining characteristic of his mode of thinking.

*The Great Man Regards Heaven, Earth, and the Myriad Things as One Body.* Thus begins the first line of Wang Yang-ming’s “Inquiry on the *Great Learning*,” a synoptic view of the central theme he had been formulating throughout his life. What he intends to convey here is neither an intellectual ideal nor an ethical injunction but, as Geertz noted, primarily “a common experience of feeling that undergirds morality.” This shared feeling is explicitly described as the “emotional inability to bear the sufferings of others.” Underlying these deceptively simple experiential assertions is an ontological claim about the “humanity of the heart.” The reason that the great man can manifest his empathic and sympathetic feelings toward another (human being, animal, plant, or stone) in a genuine and spontaneous manner is thought to be in the structure of the heart itself. Indeed, following Mencius, Yang-ming maintained that the “emotional inability to bear the sufferings of others” is an inborn capacity, not acquired (although it must be enhanced and refined) through imitative learning. Of course this does not mean, to paraphrase P. H. Wolff, that human sensitivity “matures in isolation from specific socioenvironmental influences”. On the contrary, from a developmental point of view, it is like a delicate bud which can be easily frustrated without proper nourishment.

The opposite of this kind of unpremeditated human sensitivity is often depicted as selfishness (or self-centeredness), a deliberate refusal to share with, care for, and show affection to another. Selfish acts are obviously in conflict with H. L. Rheingold and D. F. Hay’s “prosocial behavior of the very young”. Viewed from this perspective, the humane qualities of the infant as empirically

identified by Rheingold and Hay are ontologically as well as ontogenetically inherent in the original capacity of the heart. Understandably the growth of a human being depends as much upon the active participation of the learner (the infant, for example) as a “partner,” indeed a “socializer” (a sharing, caring, and feeling “great man” in process) as on what we commonly call “socialization” from outside. This middle path, as it were, must also reject both “normative biologism” and “normative sociologism.”

It is vitally important to know that Yang-ming’s interpretive position is actually predicated on a metaphysical vision. If properly understood, such a vision is in accord with the Aristotelian, and for that matter Kantian, assertion that what makes “reason” most valuable and essential to human beings is precisely the fact that it is beyond genetic constraints and thus “biologically irrelevant.” For one thing, the innateness of universalizable feelings shared by the human community is conceived as a manifestation of the same “principle” (*li*) which underlies Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. Indeed, there is only one “principle” in all beings and that “principle” is inherently in and intrinsically knowable to the “humanity of the heart.” Unlike the Platonic idea, the “principle” that is embodied in each concrete thing is the “principle” in its all-embracing fullness. There is no distinction here between man and animal, plant or stone. The uniqueness of man, however, lies in his ability to know and manifest through self-effort the “principle” in him.

Man has this ability because ontologically he is endowed with the “humanity of the heart” for self-realization which, in the tradition of *Chung-yung* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), necessitates a concomitant realization of the other. But, in practice, unless a consistent and strenuous effort at self-development is applied, man can in actuality become as insensitive as stone. This metaphor, widely used in Chinese literature, seems to imply that although man is the most sentient being that embodies the “principle” in the cosmos, what he is existentially may turn out to be a parody of what he can and ought to become. It is therefore not only man’s right but also his duty to be moral. This reminds us of Kant. However, unlike Kant, Yang-ming believed that the “principle,” which has also been rendered as “reason,” is what human nature in the ultimate sense really means. As a result, the formalist approach in Kantianism is here replaced, so to speak, by an appeal to the universality of moral feelings which are biologically based but not genetically determined. For the “principle” and the “humanity of the heart” are one and the same reality.

*The Preservation of the Heavenly Principle and the Elimination of Human Desires.* Implicit in the claim that the “humanity of the heart” is universal and that the greatness of being human lies in the maximum development of this commonly shared feeling are two conflicting images of man. He can “embody” (*t’i*) the cosmos in his heart as a concretely lived experience rather than as merely an intellectual projection. Man so conceived symbolizes, in the words of Chou Tun-i (1017–73), “the highest excellence” of the creative

process of the universe. Unfortunately, it is also probable that man is so circumscribed and corrupted by his “human desires” (*jen-yü*), biologically rooted and socioenvironmentally conditioned as well, that he can in fact inflict inhumanity upon himself and his closest kin. Even without the myth of the Fall, the range of human possibility for morality and immorality is frightfully extensive. Man can go beyond anthropocentrism (let alone egoism and ethnocentrism) and serve as a guardian of nature; or he can exhibit an aggression toward himself as well as all other beings as the most destructive force in the universe.

The contrast between the “Heavenly Principle” and “human desires” is of great significance in the light of the above. Yang-ming took it for granted that what is truly human necessarily manifests the “principle” in its most generalized sense. Paradoxically “human desires,” as limited and distorted expressions of the self, are detrimental to the original rhythm of the heart. This is why “human desires” are also described as “selfish desires” (*ssu-yü*). Just as selfishness endangers the authentic development of the self, “human desires” frustrate the true manifestation of humanity. Thus Yang-ming confidently stated that learning to become a great man “consists entirely in getting rid of the obscuration of selfish desires in order by his own efforts to make manifest his clear character, so as to restore the condition of forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things, a condition that is originally so, that is all.”

Actually, the preservation of the Heavenly Principle and the elimination of human desires must be taken as a unitary effort of self-cultivation, signifying a holistic process of ultimate personal transformation. A key concept in this connection is *i* (intention), especially an act of the will to manifest one’s “clear character” informed by the Heavenly Principle. For without a continuous quest for self-knowledge by an ever deepening psychology of purification, selfish desires cannot be eliminated and the quality of one’s life, so far as the “principle” is concerned, remains obscure. This, I suppose, is the main reason why Yang-ming attached so much importance to “establishing the will” (*li-chih*) as the first essential step in the ceaseless process of learning to be truly human. This view seems remarkably similar to F. A. Jenner’s observation, in which he suggests that “we cannot live in everyday life without acting as though the moral depends on intention, indeed intentionality”. For Yang-ming we can surmise, morality entails intending, both as a state of conscious knowing (directionality of the mind) and as a process of conscientious acting (transforming effect of the heart). Perhaps in this sense we can follow E. Turiel’s distinction between morality and convention without necessarily committing ourselves to the claim that they are “different aspects of social regulation.”

*The Full Realization of Primordial Awareness.* I mentioned earlier that the Confucian *hsin* must be glossed as “heart-mind” because it involves both cognitive and affective dimensions of human awareness. This “fruitful am-

biguity” is perhaps the result of a deliberate refusal rather than an unintended failure to make a sharp distinction between conscience and consciousness. To Yang-ming, consciousness as cognition and conscience as affection are not two separable functions of the mind. Rather, they are integral aspects of a dynamic process whereby man becomes aware of himself as a moral being. Indeed, the source of morality depends on their inseparability in a prereflective faculty. Borrowing a classical term from Mencius, Yang-ming defines this prereflective faculty as *liang-chih* (commonly translated as “innate knowledge” but here rendered as “primordial awareness”), signifying an innermost state of human perception wherein knowledge and action form a unity. For this primordial awareness, which can also be understood as a more subtle way of characterizing the “humanity of the heart,” creates values of human understanding as it encounters the world. Learning to be human, in this sense, involves a continuous development of one’s “primordial awareness.” The expression *chih liang-chih*, often translated as “the extension of innate knowledge,” may be more appropriately interpreted here as the full realization of one’s primordial awareness. I do not see any obvious conflict between this line of thinking and T. Nagel’s analysis that “a capacity to subject their prereflective or innate responses to criticism and revision, and to create new forms of understanding” is that unique quality that human beings have discovered in themselves. Yet I must admit that Yang-ming’s “primordial awareness” is not merely a rational capacity; nor is it simply a perceptual and motivational starting point. Needless to say, it also has little to do with biological nativism. Rather, it is a mode of perceiving which I earlier noted as the function of “intellectual intuition.” A feature of it is that, as a critical self-awareness, it can understand our true nature and apprehend the thing-in-itself, a capacity which Kant thought is humanly impossible.

The justification for this seemingly outrageous claim is relatively simple: “Knowing thyself” means to realize the “principle” inherent in one’s nature. Since the same “principle” also underlies humans and things in general, the procedure by which other forms of understanding are created is, in the ultimate sense, identical to that of self-knowledge. But the assumption that the level of self-knowledge attained entails a comparable depth of knowledge about humans and things in general is not an expression of subjective idealism. For the true self so conceived is never an isolated entity. The solipsistic predicament (an extreme case of self-centeredness perhaps), so far as it may have a bearing on this, is rejected by a direct appeal to the common experience of feeling. The sense of cosmic togetherness, or in Chang Tsai’s (1020–77) poetic expression that “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother. . . . All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions,” is a primary background understanding in this tradition. As a result, the whole philosophical activity centered around the skeptic’s questioning about the outside world and about other minds is never developed. Whether or not this

mode of thinking will eventually lead to a form of panpsychism is beyond the scope of our present discussion. It is clear, however, that the position introduced here is basically at odds with the view that biological or any physical structures can in themselves explain human morality.

The apparent divergence between this line of inquiry, focusing on the commonality and shareability of human experience, indeed on the unity and continuity of being, and Charles Fried's plea for a greater tolerance of diversity is perhaps a matter emphasis. I wonder, however, whether the centrality of recognizing the identity of persons as a background assumption for the morality of free, rational choosing beings does not itself presuppose a primordial awareness that despite the distinctness of persons, equality of respect is possible. After all, Kant "who sees in freedom the heart of moral value" feels it is fitting to define moral *choice* as a duty, a categorical imperative. A fiduciary commitment (in Michael Polanyi's sense) to the value of the human, I believe, is a basis for the "principle of the autonomy of morals."