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Tu Wei-ming The “moral universal” from the perspectives of East Asian thought

A defining characteristic of East Asian thought is the widely accepted proposition that human beings are perfectible through self-effort in ordinary daily existence. This proposition is based on two interrelated ideas: (1) The uniqueness of being human is an ethicoreligious question which cannot be properly answered if it is reduced to biological, psychological, or sociological considerations; and (2) the actual process of self-development, far from being a quest for pure morality or spirituality, necessarily involves the biological, psychological, and sociological realities of human life. For the sake of convenience, the first idea will be referred to as an ontological postulate and the second as an experiential assertion. I will begin this paper with a few general observations on the proposition. After I have noted some of the salient features of the East Asian mode of thinking relevant to the present deliberation, I will proceed to a more focused investigation of the two basic ideas. For brevity, the discussion of East Asian thought will be confined to the Mencian line of Confucianism, the Chuang Tzu tradition of Taoism, and the Ch’an (Zen) interpretation of Buddhism.

It should be mentioned from the outset that the primary focus of the “Three Teachings” under study is self-knowledge. Since the conception of a Creator as the ultimate source of morality or spirituality is not even a rejected possibility, there is no appeal to the “wholly other,” according to one theological tradition, as the real basis of human perfectibility. Rather, the emphasis is on learning to be human, a learning that is characterized by a ceaseless process of inner illumination and self-transformation. The Confucian ideal of sagehood, the Taoist quest for becoming a “true person,” and the Buddhist concern for returning to one’s “original mind” are all indications that to follow the path of knowledge backward, as it were, to the starting point of the true self is the aim of East Asian thought.

Knowledge so conceived is not a cognitive grasp of a given structure of objective truths; nor is it an acquisition of some internalized skills. It is basically an understanding of one’s mental states and an appreciation of one’s inner feelings. Since presumably a genuine knowledge of the self entails a transforming act upon the self, to know in this sense is not only to reflect and comprehend, but also to shape and create. For to know oneself is simultaneously to perfect oneself. This, I think, is the main reason that East Asian thought lays as much stress on how to cultivate oneself as on who and what the true self is. To the Confucians, Taoists, and Buddhists, self-knowledge is predominantly an ethicoreligious question, although it is inevitably laden with epistemological implications.

In a deeper sense, self-knowledge is neither “knowing that” nor “knowing

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how”; it is, in essence, an objectless awareness, a realization of the human possibility of “intellectual intuition.” It is believed that self-knowledge is nothing other than the manifestation of one’s real nature (inner sageliness in Confucianism and buddhahood in Ch’an), and that real nature is not only a being to be known but also a self-creating and self-directing activity. However, although self-knowledge does not depend upon empirical knowledge, it is not incompatible with sense experience, or the “knowledge of hearing and seeing.” Thus the relation between self-knowledge and empirical knowledge can be either mutually contradictory or mutually complementary. In an extreme formulation, the Taoist maintains that in the pursuit of the Way one must first lose all that one has already acquired in order to embody the Tao. But it is one thing to lose the fragmented and confusing opinions of the world and quite another to lose a sense of reality by enclosing oneself in a totally narcissistic state. Generally speaking, East Asian thought takes empirical knowledge seriously, while focusing its attention on the supreme value of self-knowledge.

The idea of “intellectual intuition” needs some elaboration. For one thing, it is significantly different from either irrationalism or esoterics. To be sure, it does claim a direct knowledge of reality without logical reasoning or inference. But, unlike what is commonly associated with mysticism, it has very little to do with revelation. Actually, the whole tradition of contemplation as a way of coming to an immediate cognizance of the true essence of God without rational thought is alien to the East Asian mode of thinking. Rather, the possibility for each human being to have “intellectual intuition” is predicated on the presumption that since humanity forms an inseparable unity with heaven, earth, and the myriad things, its sensibility is in principle all-embracing. The theological distinction between Creator and creature, signifying an unbridgeable gap between divine wisdom and human rationality, is here transformed into what Joseph Needham characterizes as an organismic vision.¹ Human beings are therefore thought to have as their birthright the potential power and insight to penetrate, so to speak, the things-in-themselves, or in Ch’an terminology, the suchness and thusness of *samsāra*. This resembles the Christian notion of divinity inherent in human nature. For, after all, in the prelapsarian state man is created in the image of God; and in the medieval Christian thought man is sometimes defined as divinity circumscribed.

It would be unfortunate if this organismic vision were understood as no more than a form of primitive animism, a doctrine which apparently conflicts with the scientific explanations of natural phenomena. Far from being an unexamined belief in the continued existence and mutual interaction of individual disembodied spirits, organismic vision here seems to have been the result of a philosophical anthropology which neither denies nor slights the uniqueness of being human. As a matter of fact, it subscribes to the non-evolutionary observation that human phylogeny has its own specific structure

which cannot be fully explained in terms of some general laws governing the animal kingdom as a whole. Needless to say, it also rejects the attribution of a discrete indwelling spirit to any material form of reality. It is perhaps not farfetched to consider the organismic vision as an ecological insight, locating humanity in a highly complex web of interdependency.

It would be equally unfortunate if, instead of animism, the organismic vision is taken as a form of anthropocentrism. The human possibility of “intellectual intuition” must not be viewed as a license for manipulative imposition of the human will upon nature. Promethean defiance and Faustian restlessness are not at all compatible with the cherished value of harmony, as both societal goal and cosmic ideal, in East Asian thought. On the contrary, the authentic manifestation of the human will is thought to be ultimate self-transformation, a liberation rather than a conquest. To Confucians, Taoists, and Buddhists, knowledge is enlightenment, a power of self-illumination. And only in its corrupt form does knowledge become a power of conquest. According to this line of thinking, to be fully human requires the courage and wisdom of constantly harmonizing oneself with an ever-enlarging network of relationships, which necessitates a perspective going beyond the restrictions of anthropocentrism.

Yet the transcending perspective never allows a departure from the lived world here and now. This is part of the reason why all major spiritual traditions in East Asia emphasize inner experience as a basis for ethicoreligious deliberation, not only the abstract “inner experience” as a category of thought for systematic analysis but also the concrete inner experience of the thinker engaged in philosophizing. The line between religion and philosophy is inevitably blurred. And what is normally associated with the discipline of psychoanalysis becomes religiously and philosophically relevant and significant. The conscious refusal or, if you will, the inability of East Asian thought to submit itself to the academic compartmentalization characteristic of modern universities is not simply a sign of its lack of differentiation but also an indication of its wholeness with all of its fruitful ambiguities. Indeed, common experiences, such as eating and walking, are respected as having great symbolic significance for moral and spiritual self-development.

For example, to the Confucian every human act is perceived as the reenactment of a time-honored ritual. Each gesture, such as eating, requires numerous practices before it takes the proper form. Only through socially recognized forms can one establish the communication necessary for self-cultivation. Human growth can thus be described as a process of ritualization. However, it is misleading to characterize Confucianism as a kind of ritualism. For a coercive imposition of well-established social norms upon the individual who cannot choose but adjust to the all-powerful society is at best the result of a highly politicized Confucian ideology of control. Confucian ethics, on the contrary, is built upon commonly shared human feelings, such as empathy.

Ritual in this connection is not a fixed norm but a flexible and dynamic procedure by which self-realization as a concrete means for communal participation rather than as an isolated quest for inner truth becomes possible. The Ch'an teaching of *satori* may on the surface seem diametrically opposed to the ritualized world, but as the Ch'an masters have never failed to note, the enlightening experience is a confirmation rather than a rejection of common sense because simple acts such as carrying water and chopping wood are the Way of Buddha. Taoism, too, for that matter, affirms the intrinsic value of ordinary human existence. They are all, in a sense, involved in the art of practical living.

It is vitally important to mention at this juncture that the East Asian concept of the human as a self-perfectible being in common ordinary existence without the intervention of a transcendent God is atheist only in a profoundly religious sense. The ultimate concern of self-realization actually necessitates a ceaseless process of inner moral and spiritual transformation. The purposefulness of life, however, is not a form of teleology in the sense of a preconceived cosmic design. In fact, human beings often remain tragically aimless and helpless, like "rudderless ships on restless waves." It is misleading to define sageliness or buddhahood in the language of entelechy. Surely human beings can become sages and buddhas because they are endowed with the "germinations" of morality or "seeds" of enlightenment, but it is highly problematical to perceive these germinations and seeds as the functional equivalents of what some vitalists claim to be the suppositiously immanent but immaterial agency responsible for the achievement of maturity in the human organism. For one thing, in either Confucianism or Buddhism, the duality of spirituality and materiality is meaningless. The Confucian *hsin*, which must be awkwardly rendered as "heart-mind," is a case in point. Intent on integrating the emotive aspects of human life with other dimensions of self-development, Mencius considers the fulfillment of the "bodily design" the highest manifestation of self-cultivation. In Ch'an, the assertion that *nirvāṇa* is *samsāra*, with all its ramifications, clearly rejects the artificial dichotomy between the body and the enlightened mind. Suggestively, the root metaphor shared by all Three Teachings in East Asian thought is the Way.

In the light of the above discussion, the rhetorical situation in which the East Asian Way is articulated has, at least, the following features: (1) the inquirer is as much an inside participant as an outside observer. It is inconceivable that the general question of self-knowledge can be completely independent of the questioner's own self-knowledge. Indeed, as the questioning process unfolds, the inquirer deepens and broadens his understanding of the general issue only to the extent that his personal transformation confirms it. However, (2) it would be mistaken to infer that the East Asian Way is subjectivistic because it lays much emphasis on inner experience. Actually, the idea of "intellectual intuition" does not give any particular individual a

privileged access to truth. Indeed, the concept of individuality is not at all compatible with it. Rather, it is predicated on a strong sense of shareability and commonality. In other words, the experience that is considered truly personal is not at all private to the individual; self-knowledge is a form of inner experience precisely because it resonates with the inner experiences of the others. Accordingly, internality is not a solipsistic state but a concrete basis of communication, or, in the Taoist expression, of “spiritual communion.”

It is in this sense that (3) the aforementioned organismic vision is the result of neither animism nor anthropocentrism but of a transcending perspective which seeks the ultimate meaning of life in ordinary human existence. Of course, it is often taken for granted that the ultimate meaning of life is never found in ordinary human existence. The commonly observed distinctions between soul and body or between sacredness and profanity are clear indications that this is so. Paradoxically, all Three Teachings of the East Asian Way endorse the view that everydayness is not only the point of departure but also the eventual return of any significant moral and spiritual journey. They believe that the true test of lasting values in any ethicoreligious tradition is common sense and good reasons. But they by no means glorify the trite and plain languages of everyday speech. It is actually in what Herbert Fingarette calls the “secular as sacred”² that the spirit of their concern for ordinariness really lies.

Against this background, the ontological postulate can be introduced with one more observation. The uniqueness of being human must first transcend many familiar forms of reductionism. It is fallacious to define human nature merely in terms of biological, psychological, or sociological structures and functions because, viewed holistically, a more comprehensive grasp of its many-sidedness is required. However, an empirical enumeration of as many as is practically feasible “human” traits is not satisfactory either. For one thing, it cannot address the question without in principle changing it in a fundamental way. To put it differently, the question about the uniqueness of being human will always be relegated to the background, as advances in biology, psychology, and sociology never intend to provide it with an answer.

The postulate about the perfectibility of human nature is thus empirically unprovable. And yet it is certainly not an unexamined faith in something beyond rational comprehension. Its status is ontological because it specifies a mode of understanding the being of the human. To be sure, perfectibility presupposes malleability and changeability. And ordinarily it is quite conceivable that malleation or change may not lead to the desired perfection. As a result, it seems that human nature can be seen as corruptible no less seriously than as perfectible. However, common to all Three Teachings is the further claim that inherent in human nature is the moral and spiritual propensity for self-development. Only when this original propensity is frustrated by a complexity of internal and external causes is human nature destroyed or led

astray. It is in this connection that Mencius insists upon the goodness of human nature as the real basis for self-realization. The Mencian thesis deserves a brief exposition.

Each human being, Mencius seems to assert, is endowed with a “moral sense,” also known as the sensibility of the *hsin*. Inherent in the *hsin* are the four germinations of the four basic human feelings: commiseration, shame and dislike, deference and compliance, and right and wrong. Although environment, both social and psychological, features prominently in human growth, the germinating power of these feelings is the structural reason for moral and spiritual self-development. In a strict sense, morality or spirituality is not internalized by but expressed through learning. The learning to be human in the Mencian tradition is therefore conceived as the “mutual nourishment” of inner morality and social norms rather than the imposition of external values upon an uncultured mind. Indeed, *hsin* is both a cognitive and an affective faculty, symbolizing the functions of conscience as well as consciousness. For it not only reflects upon realities but, in comprehending them, shapes and creates their meaningfulness for oneself.

Similarly, in the view of Taoism, the inner illumination of the mind is the real basis for self-liberation. Although Confucian values, such as humanity and righteousness, are rejected by Chuang Tzu as unnecessary and harmful social and cultural constraints detrimental to the spontaneity of nature, the pursuit of the Way requires a process of ultimate self-transformation which appeals to neither the immortality of the soul nor the existence of God but the “intellectual intuition” inherent in the true self. The *prajñā*, commonly rendered as “intuitive wisdom” or “nondual knowledge,” in Ch’an also refers to an inalienable quality of the mind which manifests itself as the true buddha nature in each person.

Accordingly, despite divergent approaches to the actual process of moral and spiritual self-development, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism all share this fundamental belief: Although existentially human beings are not what they ought to be, they can be perfected through self-cultivation; and the reason that they can become fully realized is inherent in what they are. Therefore, the human condition here and now, rather than either the original position in the past or a utopian projection into the future, is the central concern. It is in this sense that the ontological postulate of human perfectibility must be supplemented by an experiential assertion about the concrete path by which one’s own “germinations” and “seeds” can eventually be brought to fruition. This may account for some of the deceptively simple paradoxes in East Asian thought, such as:

- (a) There is sageliness in every human being / Virtually no one, not even Confucius, can claim to be a sage.
- (b) Every sentient being is endowed with buddhahood / Nirvana can never be attained except through Great Death.

- (c) Tao is everywhere / Only the most sensitive and subtle mind can hear the Way.

It should be mentioned that germinations and seeds constitute only one of the many forms of the metaphorical language used in this connection. A frequently used analogy is the digging and drilling of a well, suggesting many degrees and layers of personal knowledge. Only after one has penetrated, as it were, the deepest ground of one's existence can one truly experience the "taste" of one's enlightening self, which significantly also provides the authentic possibility for communicating with others and understanding things as they really are. The self so conceived, far from being an isolated and enclosed individual, signifies a sharable commonality accessible to every member of the human community. However, it is vitally important to note that commonality here by no means implies sameness, for it inevitably assumes different shapes of meaning as it is perceived and manifested in different persons. The idealists' claim that all rational beings will finally agree is too restrictive a notion to account for the complex structure of common selfhood in East Asian thought. It is also in this sense that all Three Teachings assume that moral and spiritual self-development involves not only a convergence of stages to be perfected but also a multiplicity of ways to be pursued. Exclusivism in ethicoreligious thought is rejected mainly because by insisting upon a single path it would be incapable of accommodating the divergent interests and concerns of human beings as a whole. The recognition that the best way for me is not necessarily the best for my neighbor is a psychology essential for the peaceful coexistence of different and even conflicting beliefs in East Asian society and culture. The Confucian Golden Rule, for instance, is deliberately stated in a negative form: "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you."

The reluctance to impose one's own way on others is a consideration for the integrity of the other, and also a recognition that one can never fully comprehend another to the same extent and in the same degree as one can comprehend oneself. The veil of ignorance, however, must not prevent one from constantly trying to empathize with other human beings as an intergral part of one's own quest for self-knowledge. Indeed, a sense of community, which is a manifestation of the organismic vision, is absolutely essential for moral and spiritual self-development. Surely, among the Three Teachings, only Confucianism unequivocally asserts that society is both necessary and intrinsically valuable for self-realization. Taoism and Ch'an do not seem to have attached much importance to human relations. But neither Taoism nor Ch'an belittles the lived world as a meaningful context in which ethicoreligious developments are assessed, as problems of afterlife, Heaven and Hell are deliberately relegated to the background. It is this sense of togetherness in the secular world, I suppose, that accounts much for the concerted efforts of the Three Teachings to eradicate the alleged fallacy of "individualism." The Confucian instructions on the falsehood of self-centeredness, the Ch'an warn-

ing against egoist attachments, and the Taoist advocacy of self-forgetfulness all seem to point to the necessity of going beyond the private in order to participate in a shared vision.

The underlying thesis, then, is equality without uniformity. To be sure, moral and spiritual self-development can be understood as a process toward an ever-deepening subjectivity, but this must not be taken as a quest for pure morality or spirituality. The idea that inner truth is mysteriously connected with a transcendent reality not accessible to the human community at large does not feature prominently in East Asian thought at all. The perfected self is never conceived as a depersonalized entity assuming a superhuman quality. This partly explains the absence of priesthood, presumably a spiritual elite mediating between the secular and the sacred, in any of the Three Teachings. Confucian, Taoist, and Ch'an masters are supposed to be exemplary teachers. They may try to instruct, discipline, and enlighten the student. But the purpose is always to inspire the self-effort of the student because the ultimate reason for self-realization is one's own inner strength.

The "Moral Universal," viewed from these perspectives, assumes a twofold significance: (1) Human beings are moral because, as self-perfectible beings, they cannot be circumscribed merely by the instinctual demands for survival or, for that matter, by the necessities and needs for the solidarity of the group, or for the perpetuation of the species. The meaning of being human is so uniquely personal that functional explanations, no matter how broad the scope they attempt to encompass, rarely escape the danger of reductionism. Indeed, simple human acts such as eating and walking have profound symbolic significance, making them qualitatively different from similar "acts" in other animals. Human hunger, for example, may from a naturalistic point of view be no more than a common physiological condition in the animal kingdom, but symbolically it is a phenomenon *sui generis*. Human development, therefore, involves much more than the combination of biological growth, psychological maturation, and the continuous internalization of social norms. (2) However, human beings are also inescapably biological, psychological, and social; and in order to realize themselves they must transform these circumscriptions into necessary "instrumentalities" for self-development. To learn to become what one ought to be, far from being a total rejection of what one is, must begin with a critical self-examination, "a reflection on things at hand." Commonly experienced feelings are therefore the points of departure for cultivating personal knowledge. It is not asceticism but perhaps a balanced diet, and certainly not occultism but a disciplined mind that can really broaden one's vision and sharpen one's awareness. Methods of "quiet-sitting," "regulated breathing," or *zazen*, notwithstanding their varying degrees of seriousness in different traditions, all seem to suggest that the given "body and mind" is after all the concrete place where great ethicoreligious insights occur. Pure morality and spirituality, admitting no biological, psychological, or sociolog-

ical factors, is a kind of formalism as unacceptable to the East Asian mode of thinking as an extreme kind of behavioral reductionism would be. Mencius may have a point when he claims that if we can fully extend the common experience of feeling unable to bear the sufferings of others, our humanity will become inexhaustibly abundant.

NOTES

1. Needham, J. and Wang, L., *Science and Civilization in China*. Vol. 2. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954–1976).
2. Fingarette, H., *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).