

Introduction

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Humans, at least since the first uses of fire, have been technological animals. The inventions of the wheel, the compass, the printing press, the internal combustion engine, and the telephone each have dramatically changed humanity's relationship to the world, as well as our relationships with one another. Yet, the transformations of human experience being precipitated by technology today are unprecedented.

We now know that human activity is capable of affecting planetary processes like climate. Humanity is experimenting with cloning, gene editing, and other forms of bio-engineering, mapping the neuro-topography of thought with functional magnetic resonance imaging, and realizing new kinds of human-machine interactions. Most profoundly, perhaps, artificial intelligence and related technical developments like machine learning and big data are blurring boundaries between both the commercial and the political, and the technical and the ethical.

These latest products of human ingenuity have the potential to radically augment human capacities or to entirely supplant them. They are already a catalyst for the emergence of new societal infrastructures and will fundamentally transform work and employment in the coming decades, challenging in the process all extant understandings of decision making and agency. In the face of such transformations—a decentering of the human that will be at least as consequential as that which occurred through the so-called Copernican revolution—serious and sustained reflection is required on what it means to be (or to become) human, and on the ethical and social safety implications of our new technologies.

The changes being driven by contemporary science and technology raise profound questions about fundamental values. We can now realistically contemplate the colonization of the moon and the development of brain–computer interfaces that could bring about truly digital consciousness. We have built computational machines that by themselves can learn how to design racecars and that can process tens of thousands of research papers in a single afternoon to predict new discoveries. We now also have the knowledge and technical expertise to realize a world in which no child needs to go to bed sick or hungry. And yet, hunger persists.

This disparity of human potentials and human realities is not merely factual—it is moral. The conjunction of remarkable technical expertise and continued failure to provide adequate nutrition to all stands as a powerful indication that we have yet to determine with sufficiently broad consensus what would count *as* a “solution” to world hunger. We have not yet persuaded ourselves that whatever changes we would need to make in our present ways of life to end hunger are worth the anticipated results. In short, the persistence of world hunger is not a technical problem. It is a moral predicament: evidence of unresolved conflicts among our own core values and interests. And hunger is just one of many such predicaments that we now face.

To address predicaments like the persistence of hunger in a world of excess food production or rising inequality in a world of historically unparalleled wealth production will require new kinds, scales, and scopes of ethical resolution. The global nature of these predicaments necessitates realizing new depths of ethical resolution, not only within communities and nations, but among them. Indeed, a guiding premise of this edited volume is that the interdependencies revealed by truly global predicaments compel questioning whether the resolve needed to address them can be realized within the horizons of any ethics committed to taking the individual—person, identity group, class, corporation, or nation—as the basic unit of moral analysis. The predicaments we now face make evident a new and profoundly unfamiliar and complex moral terrain.

Even at the personal level, the process of predicament resolution is always both contextual and reflexive. It involves us not only in changing *how* we live, but *why* we do so, and *as whom*. Global predicament resolution will require engaging in this reflexive process together, across both national and cultural boundaries. At the very least, it will require us to bracket imaginations of ourselves as singular agents acting in our own self-interest, and to deliberate together in full cognizance that either we win together or

we lose together. At the heart of these deliberations will be questions about the meaning of personhood. What is it about who we take ourselves to be that allows global hunger to persist? Why are we falling so far short of doing what is needed to secure dignified lives for all? Who do we need to be *present as* to engage successfully in the boundary-crossing work of truly shared global predicament resolution?

Responding from an East-Asian Sinitic Perspective

The chapters in this book constitute an initial response to these questions from within Sinitic philosophical traditions. These traditions—Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist—afford distinctive resources for conceiving of persons as relationally constituted and for developing a shared moral compass to guide our efforts to resolve global human predicaments in full recognition of our interdependence. In addition to their intrinsic merits as perspectives on the human experience, these traditions of thought and practice have the practical merit of being part of the cultural inheritance of roughly one-sixth of humanity. The sheer size of China's population and the fact that it will, in the coming decades, become home to the world's largest national economy mean, among other things, that Chinese perspectives must be integral to our shared efforts to resolve the global predicaments that humanity will be facing in this and coming generations.

In addition to this practical reason, there are both historical and philosophical rationales for turning to Sinitic traditions of thought. Although the roots of Confucianism and Daoism as elite traditions indigenous to what is now the Peoples Republic of China can be traced back to the Shang dynasty, they began to consolidate as canonical textual traditions during a time of great upheaval—the so-called Warring States period (475–221 BCE). Buddhist traditions began entering China during a comparable period of social, economic, and political transformation as the long-unified imperial China of the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) broke apart into shifting arrays of violently competing kingdoms and warlord alliances. There is thus historical precedent for regarding the resolutely relational character of Sinitic articulations of the human experience as, at least in part, the result of their dynamic attunement to the demands of responding practically to social, cultural, economic, and political disruption and transformation.

Moreover, the philosophical resources afforded by these traditions are arguably the result of what amounted to sustained and substantially

intercultural deliberations. By the Song dynasty (1127–1279), the mantra had become “the three teachings as one (*sanjiaoweiyi* 三教為一). Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism were being compared—by none other than the Song emperor Xiaozong (r. 1162–1189)—to the three legs of a *ding* ritual vessel symbolizing Chinese cultural and political authority. That is, they were understood to be distinct but complementary perspectives on the human experience. In fact, Buddhism had entered China from “the West”—Central and South Asia—as a manifestly “foreign” religion. And from the outset, Buddhist traditions both powerfully affected and evolved in sustained conversation with Confucian and Daoist interlocutors.

Thus, while Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thinkers have all broadly agreed that human nature is irreducibly relational and dynamic and that personhood is irreducibly interpersonal, they have differed markedly in their recommendations of how best to actualize an ethically informed understanding of who we should be present as to realize our full human potential. The continued vitality of China’s philosophical traditions owes a great deal to the internal pluralism in each that has been a significant result of their critical engagements with one another and, more recently, with traditions originating outside of Asia, especially in Europe and North America.

The Chapters

The scholars who have contributed to this collection were invited to respond from within their chosen philosophical tradition to the question, “Who do we need to be—personally, culturally, socially, economically, and politically—to navigate the great transformations of the human experience that are now under way?” They were tasked, more particularly, with reflecting on the social and political implications of “rethinking personhood” in the context of these transformations in ways that might be deemed valuable by others drawing upon very different sets of resources.

Of the ten chapters included here, eight were written by Confucian thinkers whose work has often been expressly comparative, placing the Confucian tradition in conversation with other global philosophies. These contributions are framed by essays that come from outside the Confucian tradition. While Daoism and Buddhism have remained vibrant as both philosophical and religious traditions, the cultural fabric of China is undeniably woven with predominantly Confucian thread. Moreover, Confucian resources today, with the collaboration of both the academy and political forces, are

being actively incorporated in Chinese efforts to address the predicament-laden transformations of the contemporary world. The Confucian perspectives offered here are thus justifiably granted centrality.

The two framing chapters—Buddhist and Daoist—serve a bordering function akin to that of the vocalists and dancers in a classical Greek *choros* whose role was to create an expressive bridge between actors and audience members. That is, rather than being commentaries on the other contributions, these chapters are intended to establish a field of concerns about personhood that the remaining chapters bring into Confucian focus.

The volume opens with Peter Hershock's chapter, "Compassionate Presence in an Era of Global Predicaments: Toward an Ethics of Human Becoming in the Face of Algorithmic Experience," which sets out the predicament-laden nature of the intelligence revolution now taking place due to the confluence of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence. After briefly exploring human experience as being structurally informed and transformed by powerful and emergent value-deploying systems of *agentless* agency, Hershock offers a Buddhist response to who we need to be *present as* to engage successfully in truly shared and global predicament resolution.

Building on this vocabulary of human beings and human becoming, Roger Ames engages in chapter 2 in an extended philosophical meditation on culture and human nature. In "Confucian Role Ethics and Personal Identity," Ames ranges freely among classical sources, the contemporary Confucian thought of Tang Junyi, and the American pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead to explore the embodied nature of what he terms "human becomings." What emerges is an understanding of personal presence based on the dynamic unfolding and consolidating of moral habits in the context of roles that stipulate the meaning of achieved excellence—a vision of relationally constituted persons in concert with others becoming not just human, but truly humane.

In chapter 3, "'Deference': On Sharing and Community in Confucian Ethics," Gan Chunsong begins with a detailed examination of the often underappreciated Confucian concept of deference or yielding (*rang* 讓). Following this, he embarks on a brief survey of the vicissitudes of Confucian thought and culture from the mid-nineteenth century through the final decades of the twentieth century, and its subsequent revitalization. He concludes with a visionary speculation on how the concept of deference might be pivotal in the articulation of a new approach to global governance that gradually decenters the nation-state in favor of modes of agency and community based on the priority of shared interests.

The following two chapters, by Jin Li and Kwang-Kuo Hwang, take social scientific approaches to enunciating Confucian personhood. In “Confucian Self-Cultivation: A Developmental Perspective,” Li first outlines in broad strokes the core commitments embodied in Confucian self-cultivation as a lifelong endeavor to craft oneself as a person in community with others. She then fleshes out this conceptual scheme by working through case studies of Chinese parenting and the distinctive ways in which it merges socialization and self-cultivation through the practices of exemplar modeling, combining verbal instruction with embodiment, and following emotional engagement with reasoning.

Hwang is also concerned with developmental issues, but at an historical scale rather than at that of the human lifecycle. His chapter, “Human Beings and Human Becomings: The Creative Transformation of Confucianism by Disengaged Reason,” maps Confucianism responsive adaptation to the demands of modernity. Beginning with discussions of personhood as explored by Martin Heidegger and Charles Taylor, Hwang lays out the necessity and root conditions of an “indigenous” psychology that mediates between the lifeworlds realized by cultural groups over the long-term history of their development, and microworlds constructed by individual scientists—a Confucian naturalism on the basis of which to reframe the work of social science.

Taking as his historical point of reference the turbulent Republican period China, Tang Wenming uses mourning as springboard for reflecting on the nature of freedom. His chapter, “Understanding the Confucian Idea of Ethical Freedom through Chen Yinke’s Works for Mourning Wang Guowei,” draws out the implications of seeing suicide as an ethical expression of “spiritual independence and freedom of thought.” After setting the historical stage, Tang works through Axel Honneth’s tripartite analysis of freedom realized in the objective system of social life, rather than in Kantian self-reflection or as a mere absence of constraints as in Hobbes. While stressing the immense influence of Hegel on modern Chinese philosophy, Tang argues on behalf of the need to qualify ethical freedom as a capacity for actualizing human relations in the context of an ongoing, normative reconstruction of the Confucian “five relations,” grounded in the modern concept of personal freedom.

In chapter 7, “Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation: The Confucian Aim of Learning,” Peimin Ni contests the received view that practices of self-cultivation in Confucianism have the aim of moral subjectivity, and that the Daoist ideal is to realize aesthetic subjectivity. Making

use of classical textual materials, Ni links Confucian human-heartedness to tranquility, to virtue/virtuosity, but also ultimately to aesthetic enjoyment. That is, he argues that in Confucian self-cultivation through ritualized roles and relationships (*li* 禮), the ultimate point is not moral virtue (*de* 德), but rather an achieved, aesthetic virtuosity—a capacity for transforming daily life into a field of artistic activity.

Stephen Angle is similarly revisionist in his reading of Confucian tradition in his chapter “Confucianism on Human Relations: Progressive or Conservative?” Angle’s argument is twofold. First, he takes exception to the view that Confucian conservatism and roles-defined patterns of relationality can be reduced to maintaining or restoring traditional relations. He then argues more positively that the Confucian ethos of relational conservation is consistent with an evolutionary Confucian tradition that is capable of critically incorporating modern values. This “Progressive Confucianism,” as Angle understands it, sustains traditional emphases on developing virtue, but embraces an extension of these emphases to social relations, accepting that these relations and their parameters must change in significant ways. His chapter concludes with a consideration of how contemporary spousal relations might be given a progressive Confucian reading.

Concern for the evolution of social relations is central to Sor-hoon Tan’s chapter, “From Women’s Learning (*fluxue* 妇学) to Gender Education: Feminist Challenges to Modern Confucianism.” Like Angle, Tan is critical of any naïve traditionalism that would seek the revival of Confucianism as it was understood and practiced historically. Her chapter begins with an in-depth survey of how gendered education within Confucian tradition discriminated against women and entrenched their inferior social position, followed by an account of gender relations in China today. She then explores what Confucian education and self-cultivation for women should mean in the contemporary world, emphasizing the importance of diversity and flexibility in roles and relationships as aspects of a critical and responsive Confucian feminism.

The final chapter in the collection, David Wong’s “Perspectives on Human Personhood and the Self from the *Zhuangzi*,” offers a constructive critique of Confucian preoccupations with human social relations. Elaborating on the perspectives on human being and becoming in the Daoist text the *Zhuangzi*, Wong argues for the importance of pluralism with respect to both values and identity. But he also argues for the merit of a Daoist understanding of pluralism, contrasting it with the position forwarded by Joseph Raz, according to which recognizing the worth of the commitments

and values of others undermines an engaged expression of one's own commitments and values. He then turns to address the core ethical question of the meaning of "the good life," making use of Daoist insights to advocate learning practices that encompass all the different parts of ourselves as our potential teachers, even those nonconscious parts of ourselves most intimately related to other aspects of the natural world.

Direction without Destiny

One of the distinctive features of East-Asian Sinitic philosophies is their refusal to valorize destiny. Although imperial dynasties in premodern China were understood to enjoy a "celestial mandate," this mandate was understood to be revocable. The Sinitic disposition, if we can be forgiven the generalization, has for millennia been nonteleological. That is, it has expressed a resistance to the idea that human nature *is* one thing or another, or that reality is this way only or perhaps that way. In keeping with their intrinsic pluralism, Sinitic philosophies have tended to sort themselves out through what the contemporary interpreters of Japanese thought, Thomas Kasulis and James Heisig, have characterized as carefully articulated practices of argument by relegation, not argument by refutation. This is a deceptively simple difference. The Sinitic disposition is not to attempt discovering the one and only true destiny of humanity—to specify who we should all seek to be. Rather, the attempt has been to recognize the diversity of what is truly human and also to establish which ways of being truly human are to be given primacy.

To state this in perhaps more readily appreciated terms, the Sinitic disposition philosophically has not been to determine who *has* the truth or what the truth *is* once and for all, but rather to establish a hierarchy of approaches—in *this* particular historical period—for *truing* how we are humanly present. In our view, this disposition is one well worth fostering. The "Intelligence Revolution" that is now under way will force humanity to consider—with a practical immediacy that is without historical precedent—what to valorize as freedom, as justice, and as truly humane. Among the merits of Sinitic traditions of thought and practice is their readiness to endorse transformation in the (nondestined) direction of enhancing relational diversity—that is, to provide conceptual and practical support for realizing how our differences *from* each other might be crafted into progressively evolving differences *for* one another.

In a single generation, we have witnessed the dramatic ascendancy of Asia, and of China in particular, occurring at the apparent expense of

Europe and America—a seismic shift that has transformed what was a familiar geopolitical order. Yet, more positively viewed, Asian development generally and China's growth more specifically have also brought into currency sets of cultural resources that have significant potential for reframing our engagements with the global predicaments that have beset us. The geopolitical order does not have to be structured in a way that is biased toward zero-sum, win-loss dynamics.

In seeking resources that will enhance human capabilities for resolving global predicaments like climate change, world hunger, or the algorithmic pairing of greater choice and control, primary among them are values and practices that will support replacing the familiar competitive pattern of single actors pursuing their own self-interest with collaborative patterns of players strengthening relations as a way of coordinating shared futures in which everyone is a winner. In our view, these are values and practices that will elicit appreciation of the possibility that freedom can be an expression of qualitatively deepening commitment and not just the enjoyment of numerically expanding experiential options.

As is now widely appreciated, the Sinitic traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism evince some persistent cultural assumptions and values: the holistic, ecological nature of the human experience; the high esteem accorded integration and inclusiveness; the *yinyang* interdependence of all things within their enviroing contexts; an aspiration toward deep diversity as the foundation of mutual contribution and achieved harmony; and the always provisional, emergent nature of natural, social, political, and cosmic orders. Collectively, these traditions celebrate the relational values of deference and interdependence and foster a modality of self-understanding rooted in and nurtured by unique transactional patterns of relations.

The shared argument of the authors included in this volume is not that the Sinitic cultures provide wholesale answers to the pressing problems of our times. That would be an argument aimed at refutation. Instead, the recommendations found in this collection are forwarded in a spirit of accepting accommodation tempered with practical considerations of what must, in any given instance, be granted priority. In an era of intensifying global predicaments, there is considerable urgency in taking full advantage of all of our world's cultural resources. Plurality is an undeniable fact of the contemporary world. Pluralism is among its necessary core values. What is to be avoided at all costs is advocacy of any single perspective, a one truth/one reality construction of human experience.

Who do we need to be present as to resolve the global predicaments of the twenty-first century? Our hope is that a chorus of offerings will be

forwarded from within African, American, Asian, Australasian, European, Pacific Islander, and other indigenous perspectives. This volume is, we hope, but one of many contributing to the articulation of a diversity-enhancing vision of human and planetary flourishing in an era of unprecedented “creative destruction” that is at once technological, economic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual.