

DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE PRINCIPLE (*LI*)
IN CONFUCIAN MORAL METAPHYSICS:
IS/UGHT FROM THE CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

by *Joseph A. Adler*

It is often the case in cross-cultural studies that the mere statement of a problem introduces a cultural bias fatal to full understanding. With this in mind I would like to introduce a general observation concerning Chinese religious philosophy, which I hope will orient my discussion in such a way as to minimize the danger of putting wrong questions to the material.

The observation is that, as a functional equivalent to Western religious concerns with *soteria* and Indian concerns with *mokṣa*, the indigenous Chinese religions are characterized by a general concern with fulfillment. This, of course, is related to the nondualistic character of Chinese metaphysics and cosmology and the stress on process over stasis. In a system in which what is real is phenomenal change, human beings have access to reality in daily life and there is no need for them to be saved or released from the world as they find it. Rather human beings, according to Confucian thinking, transcend themselves by actualizing themselves and transcend the world by transforming the world—transforming it, that is, by “assisting in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth.” The capacity for self-transformation, or self-transcendence, is immanent.

The Confucian approach to the relation of fact and value bears little resemblance to traditional Western approaches. While the distinction has been discussed since very early times and has been worked out in a coherent system, it has remained virtually a nonproblem, contrary to the case in Western philosophy. A real relation between what is and what ought to be not only is affirmed but also plays a central role in Confucian thought. This role becomes apparent when we consider

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the relationship of the Confucian and philosophical Taoist modes of thinking, which are often called the complementary poles of Chinese thought. This relationship hinges on the question "Do our linguistic and conceptual distinctions or categories have any objectively real basis?" To this the Confucians answer, emphatically and systematically, "Yes," and the Taoists, just as emphatically and sometimes as systematically, "No." What the Confucian option implies is the claim that human ethical values are reflections or developments of patterns obtaining in the natural world. It is important to note that a formal assumption underlying this claim—that human behavior should reflect natural patterns—is wholeheartedly shared by philosophical Taoists. Where they part from the Confucian Way is in denying that nature conforms to our ethical conceptualizations. As the fifth chapter of *Lao Tzu* bluntly puts it, "Heaven and Earth are not humane (*jen*)."

The history of the idea that human ethical society is fully ontologically grounded would be coextensive with the history of Confucian philosophy. What I wish to do is present two historical stages in Confucian thinking that bear on the "is/ought" problem. I will then attempt to show how this line of thought articulates coherently with a cosmological system based on principles quite different from those of traditional Western cosmologies.

The dominant current of thought concerning human ethical behavior in Confucianism derives from the Mencian theory of human nature (*hsing*). Mencius (4th century B.C.E.) said that human beings are primarily distinguished from other animals by their possession of the moral mind/heart (or mind, for short) in which is contained the innate tendency to act according to goodness or humanity (*jen*) and rightness (*i*). The expression of this tendency is as natural as the urge to satisfy bodily desires: "Reason and rightness please my mind in the same way as meat pleases my palate."² That this moral tendency is innate and not learned is demonstrated by Mencius in his famous argument regarding the child falling into a well.³ It is inconceivable, he says, that a passerby seeing this mishap would not experience at least an instinctive urge to reach out and save the child. Whether one actually did so, the instinctive urge, which we can verify by imagining the situation and checking our own feelings, is proof, for Mencius, of the claim that morality is an innate human characteristic. (The epistemological assumptions of this type of argument—and I think we should be free to use the word—will be discussed below.) Moreover, although all things have their natures (*hsing*), moral tendencies are unique to and definitive of human nature. Therefore the cardinal virtue *jen* ("goodness, humanity [humaneness]"), as the second translation implies, is understood as a definition of what it means to be

human. It is not simply what we should be but what we are, at bottom. Those who do not actualize their moral potential have allowed their “seeds” or “buds” (*tuan*) of virtue to be stunted by neglect. Although all human beings are born with these seeds, they must be cultivated by education and by exposure to moral exemplars. The ascription of moral “potential” to human nature then is not a statement about mere possibility but an assertion of the actual existence of morality in a “germinal” state.

The Mencian conception of human nature rests on the notion that what we should be is the fulfillment of what we are born with. *Hsing* is the normative human nature, which is given at birth as moral potential in the form of emotional and physiological tendencies, and must be cultivated. This much is fairly straightforward, but the overall human condition is more complicated. We are born also with a complement of physical and emotional needs, concerning which generally we have no choice. This constitutes our *ming* (“givenness”), often translated as “destiny,” “fate,” or “what is decreed” (referring primarily to the word’s frequent usage in the sense of “allotted life span”). *Ming* is our object nature, what we are as recipients of the favor and disfavor of Heaven, the joys and sorrows of life in the natural world. *Hsing*, on the other hand, is our subject nature, for in making the existential decision to cultivate our Heaven-endowed humanity we are fully free and fully responsible.

What precisely is the relationship between our normative subject nature and our descriptive (given) object nature? Mencius says that there is an element of *hsing* in *ming*, and an element of *ming* in *hsing*.⁴ That is, even in the brute givenness of our animal existence we have some measure of subjective control. We can, for instance, limit our desires; this in fact is a necessary element in self-cultivation.⁵ We can even improve our physical health and appearance by cultivating our moral nature.⁶ Conversely there is an element of “brute givenness” in our subjective moral nature—and this is indeed the central theme of Mencian thought. The *Doctrine of the Mean*, a text associated with the Mencian school, begins with the line “What is given (*ming*) by Heaven is called human nature (*hsing*).” It continues: “To follow human nature is called the Way (*Tao*).” The *I-ching*, or *Book of Change*, says in a similar vein: “What issues from the Way is good; what actualizes (*ch’eng*^a [“achieves, completes”]) it is human nature. . . . The continuing existence of the actualized nature is the gate (i.e., source) of the Way and rightness.”⁷ Thus human moral subjectivity is given a twofold grounding in objective reality: It is imparted by Heaven, and its actualization contributes to the natural order of things.

TWO SCHOOLS OF NEO-CONFUCIANISM

The concepts of *hsing* or subject nature and *ming* or object nature underwent considerable refinement in the revival of Confucian thought known in the West as Neo-Confucianism. The "School of Principle" associated with Ch'eng I (1033-1107) and Chu Hsi (1130-1200) continued the Mencian argument, using both his terminology and the newly developed terminology of *li*, or principle. With *li* as the ontological and moral ground, as "the foundation of all truth and values,"⁸ they constructed a metaphysical system in which subjectivity and objectivity were even more integrally related than before.

According to Ch'eng I, "*Ming* is what is endowed by Heaven and *hsing* is what things have received." Chu Hsi, explaining this statement, says that both terms refer to *li*, principle, but from different perspectives.⁹ From the perspective of Heaven's imparting it to man, that is, with man as object, it is *ming* and is associated with the physical nature and the feelings or emotions. In terms of what is innate in man, that is, with man as subject, it is *hsing*, which is associated with the moral mind.

The connection was elaborated by Chu Hsi and his successors in a twofold definition of *li*. *Li*, they said, is "that by which something is as it is (*so-i-jan*) and that to which it should conform (*so-tang-jan*)."¹⁰ The former, descriptive principle, is objectively given as *ming*, and the latter, normative principle, derives from one's subjective moral nature. These complementary aspects of the ontological ground, descriptive principle and normative principle, thus constituted a metaphysical underpinning for the previously existing ideas on human nature, ethics, and the religious life.

More specifically the answer to the questions "How can we know the good?" and "How can we ground our values in our knowledge of the objective world?" was given by the Ch'eng-Chu school in terms of a twofold method of self-cultivation: internally to cultivate an attitude of moral seriousness or reverence; externally to investigate the principles of things and "extend" them to, or infer from them, principles on which to base moral action. This process is predicated on the notions that principle (1) is unitary, (2) inheres in the human being as human nature, and (3) manifests itself as the instinctive moral urges of the mind/heart which characterize human nature. Knowing principle necessarily involves knowing the objective principles of things as well as the subjective, moral principle of human nature. Since principle is unitary or universal (like natural law according to the assumption of Western science), one's knowledge is not complete until one arrives—by the process of inferring successively more general principles—at the insight into the unity of subjective and objective principle, that is, at the principle which is valid both as a normative

principle of moral action and as a descriptive principle of the objective world. Thus moral knowledge and sensory-intellectual knowledge are mutually verifying. One checks the validity of sensory-intellectual knowledge by seeing that it has legitimate moral implications; conversely, to prevent moral knowledge from being arbitrary and selfish, one must see that it coheres with one's knowledge of the external world.

A more radically subjective position was taken by the "School of Mind" associated with Lu Hsiang-shan (1139-93) and Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529). In this school the human mind is not only the touchstone but also the source of all true knowledge, and knowledge is true only when it is expressed in moral action. There is, accordingly, less reliance on "investigating things" than in the Ch'eng-Chu school, and there is more emphasis on making the will "sincere" (*ch'eng^b*).¹¹ Moral action proceeding from this condition of authenticity will be true to the human mind, which is identical with principle. True moral knowledge therefore *is* the moral action arising from the process of self-cultivation.

In varying degrees these two schools of Neo-Confucianism assign ultimate responsibility for the truth of ethical values to the human thinking, judging subject. It is by looking inward and discovering the principle of our own subjectivity, in its uniqueness and in its commonality with all things, that we obtain knowledge of ethical principles.

This meaning of human subjectivity has, in addition, a more general epistemological implication. I noted earlier that argument for Mencius often took the form of assertions deemed self-evidently true; they could be verified simply by examining one's own feelings. The Neo-Confucians proposed a religio-philosophical basis for this type of argument. By identifying the principle of human subjectivity with the ontological ground, they posited a subjective (internal, autonomous) basis for real knowledge of both ethical values and the ultimate nature of reality. We might consider this an epistemological theory based on a "subjective ontology," but it is not a form of subjectivism as the term is ordinarily used, for knowledge and values are grounded ontologically, independently of the individual mind.

Nevertheless the problem of intersubjective agreement on principles may appear to be a serious one for this mode of thinking. It is important to note, however, a basic feature of Confucian ethics that (especially in light of the cosmological system with which it coheres) theoretically obviates the problem, namely, that it is a situational ethic. Specific moral rules of propriety must be determined in all cases by the concrete particulars of the situation—the shape of the immediate ethical space. Ultimately this is not a moral relativism, for it is the concrete, *temporal* situation which is real and is that by which the

validity of moral behavior must be determined. Therefore, rather than saying that the ethical standard changes to fit the situation, it would be more precise to say that the rule at all times is a true expression of the reality in process.

RADICAL INTEGRATION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

There are several ways in which this set of ideas concerning subjectivity cohered with the general Confucian world view. Mencius's statement, "It is self-cultivation that brings order to the world,"¹² and the well-known eight stages of self-cultivation in the *Great Learning* (extending outward from self to society), both indicate the crucial role of the autonomous human subject in the Confucian scheme of things. Self-cultivation is considered to have real effects beyond the self, and these effects are in fact the test of genuine self-cultivation and the verification of knowledge. Thus:

A man of humanity, wishing to establish himself, establishes others; wishing to be prominent himself, he helps others to be prominent.¹³

Therefore the ruler cannot fail to cultivate his personal life. Wishing to cultivate his personal life, he cannot fail to serve his parents. Wishing to serve his parents, he cannot fail to know man. Wishing to know man, he cannot fail to know Heaven. . . . When the ruler cultivates his personal life, the Way will be established.¹⁴

It is man that can enlarge the Way; not the Way that can enlarge man.¹⁵

This pattern of thought, which we might designate "extension as completion," is not an idiosyncratic feature of Confucian thought but articulates with broader patterns in Chinese cosmology. Things in general are considered to manifest fully their natures only when their influence is extended beyond themselves. This is the crucial importance of relationality in nearly all aspects of the traditional Chinese world view—reflected, for example, in the structure of the Chinese language. Since the language is uninflected, the context of a word determines its meaning to a much greater extent than in an inflected language. Similarly, just as units of meaning are inextricable from their relational contexts, so things are bound in spatiotemporal relations which function substantively, that is, the relations constitute the subject of which events are predicated.¹⁶ Things cannot be seen as objective entities over against an abstract spatiotemporal grid. They are things in themselves in their subjective, spatiotemporal relations. They can be known by the human mind as things in themselves because the mind is bound in the same net of relations, that is, the mind is of the same substance. The subjectivity of a thing, defined relationally, is its true nature and the locus of its functionality. This is the rationale—the logic—underlying the Five Phases (or Five "Elements") system of classification and partially accounting for its pervasive in-

fluence in Chinese science. The subjective nature of a thing is defined by its transformational position within the class of things to which it belongs. In other words, empirical, spatiotemporal events are subjective, as well as objective, facts. As Joseph Needham puts it:

Things behaved in particular ways not necessarily because of prior actions or impulses of other things, but because their position in the ever-moving cyclical universe was such that they were endowed with intrinsic natures which made that behaviour inevitable for them. If they did not behave in those particular ways they would lose their relational positions in the whole (which made them what they were), and turn into something other than themselves. They were thus parts in existential dependence upon the whole world-organism. And they reacted upon one another not so much by mechanical impulse or causation as by a kind of mysterious resonance.¹⁷

The medium for this resonance is *ch'i*, matter-energy or material force. The nature of this fundamental substance lends itself more readily to a kind of induction, a stimulus of a subject's active response, than to the mechanical causation of an object's passive effect. The thing acted upon is induced to its own mode of action, like a sympathetically vibrating piano string. Things interacting physically are therefore acting subjectively, that is, as subjects manifesting their own "intrinsic natures" and normative principles of action, not simply as objects reacting to extrinsic forces according to universal mathematical principles. The natural tendency of things to actualize their inherent potential is conceived as the fundamental operative principle in nature.

This radical integration of subjectivity and objectivity is helpful in understanding the Confucian emphasis on social relations. The emphasis is based not simply on the fact that a person exists in a social network and must make it operate harmoniously. Rather the fully developed person, the sage, transforms those around him and the world itself by assisting in the actualization of their potential, thereby actualizing his own nature. He achieves this by acting as a model or exemplary teacher, stimulating others to fulfill their natures and transform themselves. This transformational power is the preeminent characteristic of the sage according to the classical Confucian canon. In the later Confucian appendices to the *I-ching* it is assimilated with the creativity of Heaven (symbolized by the first hexagram), which is manifest in the universal process of change (symbolized by the fluctuations of the hexagram lines). The first generation of Neo-Confucians took this further, defining *jen* ("humanity") as this universal creative process of "life and growth" (*sheng-sheng*).¹⁸ Thus they ascribed to every person what in the West is reserved as the prerogative of God: the possibility of being pure subject. Each human subject is a fount of objective reality.

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that we might be tempted to put inappropriate questions to the material, questions deriving from Western assumptions or patterns of perception not shared by the traditional Chinese. By this I did not mean we should suspend our basic rules of logic but that we should attempt to see the particular internal logic or rationale of the system. An error that might arise, for example, would be to force into the Chinese world view a problem-oriented approach to the relation of fact and value, that is, to ask how they would deal with the problem of survival, or the problem of peace or happiness. These are of course concerns of theirs. But on the philosophical level their approach is not problem oriented but definitional, and this difference is consistent with the differences in cosmologies. It is also consistent with the emphasis on fulfillment rather than salvation. The above problems thus resolve into the question "What does it mean to be human?" or, stated in a form general enough to include the philosophical Taoists, "What does it mean to be?" For the Confucians this requires a theory of human nature with ontological support, and a theory of the gap between what we are and what we should (or can) be. Although I have stressed in this paper the bridging of the gap, I have attempted by my use of the word "potential" to indicate how indeed the gap is conceived: It is not the one between being and becoming, or spirit and body, or god and animal, but the gap between actuality and potentiality. It is in this gap where the fundamental ethical and existential problems in Chinese thought lie.¹⁹

NOTES

1. *Doctrine of the Mean* 22, in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and comp. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 108. Most of the passages quoted here can be found in this book. Other recommended translations are *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938); *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970); *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967).

2. *Mencius* 6A. 7.

3. *Ibid.* 2A. 6.

4. *Ibid.* 7B. 24.

5. *Ibid.* 7B. 35.

6. *Ibid.* 7A. 21.

7. *Great Treatise* 1.5.3; 7.2.

8. *Reflections on Things at Hand*, comp. Chu Hsi and Lü Tsu-ch'ien and trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. xvii.

9. *Ibid.*, sec. 1.7; *Source Book* (n. 1 above), p. 612.

10. A.C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-chuan* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), p. 29. Cf. *Source Book*, p. 611.

11. See glossary for distinction from *ch'eng*^a.

12. *Mencius* 7B. 32.

13. *Analects* 6:28.

14. *Doctrine of the Mean* 20.

15. *Analects* 15:28.
 16. "Thing" (*wu*) was defined as "event" (*shih*) by Ch'eng I, among others (*Source Book*, p. 552).
 17. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 5 vols. to date (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954-), 2:281.
 18. *Source Book*, pp. 530, 532, 539, 554, 560.
 19. Intriguing possibilities for further research are suggested by Werner Heisenberg's remarks on "potential reality" as the ground of the emerging scientific understanding of the world. See, e.g., Werner Heisenberg's *Across the Frontiers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 83. The resemblances of Chinese and Whiteheadian philosophy are even more striking, and much work is being done in developing their implications. The *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and *Philosophy East and West* have published many excellent articles along these lines. My feeling is that, if indeed there are substantial similarities to traditional Chinese thought emerging in modern science, the study of Confucian moral metaphysics is likely to be helpful in suggesting ways in which such a view of the physical world might be integrated with a system of ethical values.

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

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|---------------------------|----|--------------------|-----|
| <i>ch'eng^a</i> | 成 | <i>ming</i> | 命 |
| <i>ch'eng^b</i> | 誠 | <i>sheng-sheng</i> | 生生 |
| <i>ch'i</i> | 氣 | <i>shih</i> | 事 |
| <i>hsing</i> | 性 | <i>so-i-jan</i> | 所以然 |
| <i>i</i> | 義 | <i>so-tang-jan</i> | 所當然 |
| <i>I-ching</i> | 易經 | <i>Tao</i> | 道 |
| <i>jen</i> | 仁 | <i>tuan</i> | 端 |
| <i>li</i> | 理 | <i>wu</i> | 物 |