

Book Reviews



Henry Rosemont Jr.

Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.

The unique contribution of Henry Rosemont Jr.'s *Against Individualism* lies not only in criticizing individualism, which has been done by others, but in doing it by comparing individualism with Confucianism. Without this comparison, the critique would feel limited and unaware of the modern pan-dominance of the individualism that expresses itself “from Hobbes, Locke, and Kant through Marx, Bentham and Mill to Rawls and their champions, and extends even to most contemporary communitarians and/or feminists” (p. 38). At the same time, lack of reflection on this critical comparison has rendered many contemporary studies of Confucianism—which somewhat arbitrarily combine it with individualism, nationalism, socialism, and, especially, communitarianism—shallow and rootless.

In this book, individualism means the view of “hypothesizing human beings as altogether distinct from each other, and capable of being described, analyzed and evaluated largely if not solely in isolation; and in the end, the basic objects of worth, respect and dignity” (p. 34). It therefore assumes that the human being as a proper individual is rational, reflexively self-conscious, free, autonomous, and value-bearing (pp. xii, 33, 38, 47). Rosemont spends three chapters (ch. 3-5) demonstrating, from philosophical, neuro-scientific, social, political, and moral angles, that this individualism is fundamentally untenable and unjust, or “at best a confused one [idea]” (p. 57). I found his arguments convincing and clear, but see the following chapters as even more interesting because they provide a genuine theoretical and empirical alternative to individualism in Confucianism.

Lawrence Kohlberg suggests that morality has three levels (six stages), of which the higher two are individual conscience with principle orientation (first

level) and obeying authorities (second level).¹ Conventional thought would likely believe that individualism is at the highest level and Confucianism at the second. But here Rosemont changes the basic format of how we understand human morality: he argues that the level or stage higher than “good-boy orientation” is not the self-centered conscience, but rather Confucian role-ethics. It is characterized not merely by “showing respect for authority” but by “reciprocal relationships” (p. 100) and “aesthetic dimensions of the interaction” (p. 97), which identify a better or more harmonious moral consciousness than the individual one.

This kind of role-ethics focuses not only on reciprocal social roles in general but on the closest and the most natural ones, for example, family roles such as those between parents and children, husbands and wives, and elder and younger brothers, as the main source of our moral awareness (pp. 98, 150-154). Among them, the role children play with their parents (*xiao*, lit. family reverence or filial piety) or is “our first, and always most fundamental role” (p. 98). This view, which is authentically Confucian and supported by almost all important Confucian classics, has been largely neglected by neo-Confucians in the modern era. Rosemont, however, finds it unavoidable if we want to reject individualism in a fundamental way. *Xiao* as family-role playing depends on neither rules nor contract (p. 109) but on natural feelings and attitudes among relatives because children have “a natural response” to their parents’ affection and are “deferring to deferrers [parents defer to their parents]” rather than simply deferring to parents (pp. 98, 130). So this is essentially a relation and morality of existential time—that is, a generational receiving and giving of affections and deference forward and backward reciprocally during a lifetime. There is a situational as well as fundamental resonance, reason, and fairness in it, much more so than in self-centered individualism.

Why is *xiao* the most important relation for moral nurturing? Because, in contrast to *ci* (parental affection for children), it does not come mainly from in-born instinct but, like the capacity for language (pp. 24, 103), is a combination of the natural and the learned and therefore will fundamentally affect the

1 Lawrence Kohlberg: *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 44, table 1.2. The second level, composed of two stages of “good-boy orientation” and “orientation to ‘doing duty’ and to showing respect for authority,” is featured as “Moral value resides in performing good or right roles, in maintaining the conventional order and the expectancies of *others*.” The third or the top level, composed of two stages too as “contractual legalistic orientation” and “conscience or principle orientation,” is described to be “Moral value resides in conformity by the *self* to shared or sharable standards, rights or duties” (emphasis added).

development of our general moral consciousness and behavior. For this reason, Confucians found it necessary to cultivate the natural impulse of *xiao* through rituals (*li*), one of six Confucian arts that function between the innate and the artificial. Rosemont captures the middle position—between the natural and the educational, the moved and the moving, the deferring and the remonstrating (p. 99)—of *xiao* sensitively and therefore proposes that the “ego-reduction” rituals are “spiritual [rather than merely ‘behavioral’] discipline” based on the arts (p. 143) or the “communal ‘grammar’” making life meaningful (p. 145). By loving and yielding to your parents, you will probably not treat others’ parents cruelly, especially when the *xiao* consciousness is tuned, enhanced, and enlarged by the rituals and other Confucian arts.

From this perspective, therefore, a profound middle way of the role-ethics is initiated by the *xiao*. It is said to be a kind of particularism and pluralism because it does not obey uniform rules of universal principles (p. 101) and has to be adapted to concrete family situations (p. 106). At the same time, it does not violate any homoversal principle and need not cause relativism (p. 29). Rather, by opposing hard-minded individualists, it has abundant sympathy and timely wisdom to realize derived human rights such as equality (pp. 110–112), while resisting the national movement to “erase poverty” from communist principles. Without religious metaphysics, dogma, and an absolute deity, the role-ethics nevertheless gives us “ultimate gifts of the spirits” and creates a “human-centered religion” (p. 141) or, rather, a *xiao* religion of family temporality possible. “[L]iving in the ancestors and living on in succeeding generations” (p. 151) actualizes a religion of “immortality—here, now, in *this* world” (p. 157). This undogmatic religion does not conflict with the beliefs of any faith (p. 154) and therefore can provide a common basis of belief for humanity’s future.

Although I greatly appreciate the book’s full-bodied critique of individualism and its deep exposure of the generational temporality that enables family-based morality and religion, I nonetheless see a chance for furthering the inquiry by incorporating the concept and philosophy of *yin-yang*. It was through the productive structure of *yin-yang*—opposing but mutually dependent relations between two sides—that the existential temporality (*shi*) and complementary roles were philosophically explained and advocated, because we find the *yin-yang* within past (ancestors) and future (offspring), husband and wife, and parents and children. Therefore, *The Book of Changes*, another Confucian classic, states: “Because of heaven [*yang*] and earth [*yin*], there are all things in the world; because of all things in the world, there are men and women; because of men and women, there are husband and wife; because of husband and wife, there are parents and children” (*The Order of the Hexagrams*). It is not hard to see from the *yin-yang* origin of all things,

especially of the family roles, that individualism is impossible and family relations are primordial. Moreover, the *yin-yang* structure not only justifies the generalizing tendency of family love to extra-familial persons but also sets limits on the formation of a family. That is why I feel a little bit uneasy at Rosemont's *unconditional* acceptance of homosexual families (p. 125), because gender as an embodiment of *yin-yang* does shape our understanding of family in crucial ways.² I am also surprised to read that we should send our aged parents to a nursing home when things become difficult, for instance, when we are in our early thirties and "our responsibilities to each other, our children, home, and jobs take up 120 percent of our time" (p. 126).

This relates to another point that deserves discussion. The book appears to lack reflection on the modern economic and technological causes of the formation of individualism and the deterioration of families. The modern high-tech sectors and sciences are even regarded as favorable to family relations and role-ethics (pp. 154-156). However, the situation in which "jobs take up 120 percent of our time" is formed precisely by the demands of modern economic and technological life, whereas a traditional economy of agriculture and crafts would favor taking care of one's parents as well as caring for children. Economics and technology are therefore not neutral but, instead, substantially influence our attitudes toward family.

In sum, this is an insightful and timely book that addresses the main source of many tough problems faced by the modern individual and brings to them a family-rooted Confucian morality, philosophy, and religion in the arts. Some historians and scientists hope that Confucianism can help human beings have a brighter future, and this book supports that hope.

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2 Refer to my paper "How Should Confucianism View the Legalization of Homosexual Marriage?," *The Journal of Renmin University*, 2016.1, pp. 62-70.