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How to Return to the Family: the Redemption of Modernity

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Abstract

“Family” is a word charged with complex emotions. As a matter of philosophical inquiry, however, we need to bracket everyday understandings of family, its historical mechanisms, and the findings of social-scientific research, so as to clarify family as a philosophical concept and reveal its fundamental character as an existential structure. Modernity is founded on the logic of “leaving the family.” The privileged status of the individual as subject originates in Protestant theology and is deepened in modern philosophy, yet the profound crisis of the individual-subject has given rise to modern nihilism. Drawing on interpretive paths to redemption within the Chinese-speaking world, this article offers a response to the crisis of modernity: “returning to the family” becomes the orientation of this restorative redemption. Guided by this perspective, modern Western philosophy likewise reveals a path of salvation grounded in family. Ultimately, on the basis of an “ontology of family,” we seek to disclose the “nurturing” dimension of human existence.

Keywords

philosophy of family – leaving the family – nihilism – return – nurturing lifeworld

The proposal of a philosophy of family has attracted wide attention. It touches a certain tender spot in life and has provoked much theoretical debate. The goal

of philosophy is to investigate the logical structures underlying the world and to address fundamental questions of human existence. As a universal human concern, “family” should not be excluded from such inquiry. In a modern society dominated by the ethos of individualism, family has long been forgotten in philosophy. As Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) observed, “homelessness” has become the destiny of the modern human being. After “homelessness,” why should one “return to the family”? Philosophy has a responsibility to demonstrate both the necessity of this return and its possible prospects.

1 “Family” as a Philosophical Concept

Heidegger cites Novalis’s (1772–1801) poetic line: “Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere.”¹ Heidegger, of course, has his own interpretation of this line, but one point can be agreed upon: unlike the stone, which is “worldless,” and the animal, which is “poor in world,” the human world is “world-forming.”² This world requires grounding. Both Western and Chinese intellectual traditions offer certain lines of thought along these paths. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) said that man is a political animal, while Xunzi 荀子 (313–238 BCE) held that what fundamentally distinguishes humans from animals is the capability to form communities. The most basic unit of communal life is the family. If we use “grouping” as the basis for grounding the “world-forming” character of human existence, a fundamentally different picture emerges.

To clarify family as a philosophical concept, we must first bracket the distractions of everyday consciousness. As the most primordial unit of existence, family is often emotionally entangled with all kinds of forces. What philosophy addresses when it speaks of family is the structure at the level of human existence. It requires us to return to the original family and to re-examine its philosophical logic.

Second, we need to frame the various institutionalised expressions of family in history. Family has been the object of diverse institutional designs across human history. We need to distinguish the existential structure of family from its various historical-institutional expressions. Within the Chinese cultural tradition, there is both profound wisdom concerning human existence and, at the same time, various inhumane institutional designs that have appeared in

1 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 176.

history. Having discerned its existential structure, we must guard against the indiscriminate conflation of issues belonging to different levels.

Furthermore, we need to distinguish between social-scientific research and philosophical inquiry. The family is a direct object of study for many social sciences, yet such research has not laid a new philosophical foundation for the study of family. Each social science operates with its own “ontological commitments” and is capable of studying the question of family on the basis of the individual, but this very framework already dissolves the very idea of family as such.

The disappearance of family in philosophy also has its own internal causes. Western philosophy has often regarded family as a form of natural association. From Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, family has been seen as a natural phenomenon, the basic unit of human reproduction, procreation, and nurture. “Natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it.” For this reason, the family has not yet risen to the level of a “space of freedom.”³ This mode of thinking is itself constructed upon the Western philosophical dichotomies of nature versus spirit and necessity versus freedom. By contrast, in the Chinese intellectual tradition, where “the Way is not far from human beings” (*dao bu yuanren* 道不遠人), the “differentiation” (*fen* 分), “rightness” (*yi* 義), and “harmony” (*he* 和) among family members are precisely the wellspring of culture.

In the modern context, some scholars, adopting an individualist philosophical standpoint, argue that family can no longer serve as a foundation for the “world-forming” character of human existence. The fundamental problem with this misunderstanding is twofold. First, it treats the basic form of modern society, founded upon the individual, as an eternally fixed model, failing to see that this is precisely the parochialism of modern society. Second, although family as a form of life certainly takes diverse forms, family as a “family-structure” of human existence possesses fundamental determining features.

The “philosophy of family” investigates the sources and foundations of these basic elements. The philosophical significance of family may be revealed on four levels. First, at the existential level, it discloses the basic existential structure of family: husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister. Second, at the ontological level, family is another form of “relational ontology” within human existence, irreducible to the individual. Third, at the axiological level, family forms its own value system and guides human beings toward the fundamental model of “love.” Fourth, at the level of the “lifeworld,” family

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 30.

provides an important foundation for humanity's "world-forming" existence through its ontological structure. In this way, it depicts the earliest nurturing structure of human existence. This is a structure that has been de-sensualised, showing how the "nurturing" dimension of the "lifeworld" is possible. Family thus lays the ontological foundation for this "nurturing lifeworld."

2 Why Modernity Is Founded on "Leaving the Family"

"Returning to the family" implies a prior process of leaving the family. The current project of modernity is a structure originating in the Western cultural tradition. Modernity's emphasis on the individual is present in Christianity and is closely connected with "leaving the family." In the New Testament, there is a series of statements hostile to the family: "A man's enemies will be the members of his own household";⁴ "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."⁵ All of this implies that within Christianity there is a logic of extracting the individual from the natural family, the purpose of which is to incorporate every person into the holy family under God the Father: "Here are My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."⁶ Here, a "holy family" is constructed on the prototype of family, thereby impelling the individual to leave the natural household of real life. This is precisely the inaugural moment in the birth of the individual.

The individual in the modern sense truly comes to prominence in the Protestant Reformation. Lutheran theology emphasizes "justification by faith" and focuses on the "inner person" as distinct from the "outer person." Human beings are saved through inward faith; the "inner person," strengthened by God's grace, becomes strong and powerful, and thus dares to leave the family and to resist the various institutions of the secular world. This strong "inner person" is precisely the core meaning of the modern individual. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) highly valued the significance of the Christian idea of inner freedom, arguing that modernity begins with Luther and that the essence of the "Reformation" is that "Man is in his very nature destined to be free."⁷

4 *New Testament*, Matthew 10: 36.

5 *Ibid.*, 10: 37.

6 *Ibid.*, 12: 49–50.

7 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1956), 412.

This Protestant position is extended in modern philosophy. The priority of the individual as “subject” is first established in René Descartes’s (1596–1650) philosophy, where the entire world is grounded in “the cogito.” In the name of “natural rights,” Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) transforms the Christian idea that “all are equal before God” into equality among “individuals” possessing natural rights, thereby re-establishing the foundations of modern political philosophy on the basis of free and equal “individuals.” Through his critique of Robert Filmer’s (1588–1653) *Patriarcha*, John Locke (1632–1704) rejects “paternal authority” and once again confirms the priority of the individual. Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) philosophy internalizes the external ethical constraints imposed on the individual as rational moral requirements, forming an autonomous and universalized moral philosophy. Kant’s philosophy likewise inherits the Christian spirit: “The formula proposed by Kant is at the same time the spirit of Protestantism, that is, the Christian spirit under the influence of a fully inwardly grounded foundation and the primary realm of secular activity.”⁸ The modern individual is thus ultimately established in philosophical terms.

The abundant material life of modern society, for its part, provides the material conditions for the individual to leave the family. Only in modern society does the immense growth of productivity make the independent existence of the individual a reality. The establishment of the “individual-subject” sounds the opening bars of modernity’s symphony of fate, and modernity’s “leaving the family” becomes inevitable. The Chinese New Culture Movement advocated “opposing familism and rejecting filial piety” and called for “leaving the family.” Under the impact of the philosophy of the “individual-subject,” the traditional Chinese conception of the family likewise collapsed. In both China and the West, “leaving the family” is a feature of modern society. Modern China’s eagerness to escape the constraints of the traditional family further led us to abandon philosophical reflection on family. The rich intellectual resources concerning the family in the Chinese-speaking world have gone philosophically unappreciated. The “world-forming” dimension grounded in “grouping” has never been brought to light, leaving a significant gap in the human existential orientation.

8 Teluo'erqi 特洛爾奇 [Ernst Troeltsch], “Xiandai jingshen de benzhi” 現代精神的本質, in *Jidu jiao lilun yu xiandai* 基督教理論與現代, trans. Zhu Yanbing 朱雁冰 et al. (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004), 62.

3 The Deep Crisis of Individual-Subject Philosophy: the Prospect of Nihilism

The philosophy of the “individual-subject” lays the foundation for the modern world. Yet why do modern human beings appear so “lost” and “homeless”? This is precisely the premise upon which the idea of “returning to the family” is established. Hegel acutely identified the flaw in the reason of the individual, arguing that the abstract good possessed by individual reason manifests itself, when it is alone with itself, as “the deepest inner solitude.”⁹ The individual thus feels an inner “emptiness”; subjectivity without the support of God is fragile.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) brought philosophy to bear on the individual as actually encountered. In his view, only the individual who has undergone infinite resignation can grasp their own existence through faith.¹⁰ This individual is no longer the rational individual celebrated by the Enlightenment, but an individual who must confront their own mortality and finitude. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, after the proclamation that “God is dead,” the universal dimension that had supported the individual collapsed entirely. Existentialist philosophy lays bare the true face of individual existence: loneliness, absurdity, indifference, nothingness, and other existential features.

The “separation” between the contingent individual and the universal dimension presupposes, at a more fundamental level, the Platonic-Christian structure of the world. The collapse of this world-structure is precisely what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) reveals to us: “Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?”¹¹ Nietzsche’s diagnosis is that the Platonic structure of the world, upon which Western culture is founded—a structure that separates the sensible from the supersensible—possesses no truth. When the previous order of values disintegrates, beings themselves lose value and meaning. God is no longer the measure of being; human beings become their own measure. This is both the blessing of the individual and the individual’s nightmare.

9 G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 136.

10 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Everyman’s Library, 1954), 37.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 9.

Heidegger situates the genesis of nihilism squarely upon “individual-subject” philosophy. “Nihilism is that historical process through which the dominant ‘supersensible realm’ becomes ineffective and void, such that beings themselves lose their value and meaning.”¹² The universality that allowed the individual to stand firm was originally established through God. Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead” rapidly “emptied out” this universality within the individual, rendering ineffective the “universality” by which the individual had been able to stand upright in the modern world. Once the force of negation falls upon the individual, the negation of beings as a whole becomes an easy matter.

Karl Löwith (1897–1973) reveals the cause of nihilism from the perspective of modern philosophy of history: the Christian eschatological view of history was secularized in modernity into a this-worldly view of history as progress.¹³ “God is dead” not only turns the individual toward the void but likewise drives historical consciousness toward “nothingness.” Cut loose from God and severed from grand historical narrative alike, the individual becomes a rootless and homeless existence.

Philosophers in the modern period expended enormous effort in shaping the powerful “individual-subject”; yet once its true face is exposed, it proves all the more fragile. Psychoanalytic theory, postcolonial theory, feminist philosophy, and other approaches reveal from different angles how the “individual-subject” came to be fashioned as so powerful. Among these critiques, feminist critique is especially important in disclosing the thread of the family that has been obscured by the individual in modern society.

From ontology and philosophy of history to philosophy of spirit, the “individual-subject” philosophy constructed in the modern period reveals, under existential analysis, the prospect of nihilism. The crisis of modernity arises from this basic structure. Once the modern individual no longer relies upon the sacred, it easily slides into abstract reason, understanding the surrounding world according to the principle of quantification and comprehending all things through the principle of utility. To redeem modernity, it is not enough merely to tinker at the margins of Western modernity’s impasse; one must equally search for new possibilities from within the broader existential horizon of humanity.

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- 12 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 4.
 13 Ka'er Luoweite 卡爾·洛維特 [Karl Löwith], *Shijie lishi yu jiushu lishi* 世界歷史與救贖歷史, trans. Li Qiuling 李秋零 and Tian Wei 田薇 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhì sanlian shudian, 2002), 5.

4 Return: the Chinese-Speaking World's Understanding of Redemption

Confronted with the prospect of nihilism, “redemption” has once again become a key term in modern philosophy. In the Christian context, “redemption” presupposes a dualistic world-structure dividing God from the earthly world, and the relation between God and human beings becomes the decisive dimension for resolving the predicament. “Christian redemption,” in essence, is grace bestowed from a transcendent God.

In the age of Enlightenment, the sacred power that had sustained the individual was transformed into the power of reason. Yet after the Enlightenment, this very “individual-subject” instead fell under the conquest and domination of instrumental reason. “These models invariably begin by liberating people from error, from confusion, from some kind of unintelligible world which they seek to explain to themselves by means of a model; but they almost invariably end by enslaving those very same people, by failing to explain the whole of experience.”¹⁴ The world of reason collapsed into the world of instrumental reason, and aesthetic power became one possible form of “redemption.” “Redemption” itself presupposes that one is “redeemed” by a higher power. Yet the aesthetic power issuing from the individual itself does not seem sufficiently strong to help people confront the challenges of the modern rational world.

To understand modernity, we must adopt a broad perspective; to move beyond its crisis, we likewise need to search for paths of “redemption” within a broader horizon. The mainstream culture of the Chinese-speaking world offers us a certain line of thought for emerging from this “crisis.” The dualistically opposed world presupposed by the problem of “redemption” does not exist in the Chinese-speaking world. In its cultural tradition, there is only one world; yet within this world there are the three powers of Heaven, Earth, and humanity. In a modern context, these may be understood as the three dimensions of nature, history, and humanity, though they still exist within an “integrated world.” In this “integrated world,” the three dimensions of Heaven, Earth, and humanity mutually check and balance one another, following the Way of Heaven and Earth and forming the Doctrine of the Mean. The power of “salvation” does not come from God, nor does it rely solely on the power of the individual himself. Rather, it depends on the relationship among the three, on the mutual counterbalancing of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, and on the cyclical recurrence of the Way of Heaven that arises therefrom.

14 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

In the intellectual tradition of the Chinese-speaking world, the power of “salvation” does not exist in the beyond; it comes from what is close at hand. *Zhongyong* 中庸 states that the Way is not far from human beings; the Way of the gentleman begins with the relationship between husband and wife, and, at its utmost reach, is observed in Heaven and Earth. The search for the power of salvation is not directed outward, but instead emphasises “repaying the root and returning to the beginning”: “The rites of the world are directed toward returning to the beginning ... Returning to the beginning is directed toward deepening the root.”¹⁵ This is not a concept of “redemption” in the sense of buying back, but rather a way of “returning” to one’s foundation through “repaying the root” and “deepening that foundation.”

Within the “integrated world” originating in the Chinese-speaking world, there has always been a dynamic of life’s “return.” People have attached particular importance to the interpretation of the *fu* 復 hexagram in the *Zhouyi* 周易. The *fu* hexagram understands the way of the world’s salvation through the return of the first *yang* 陽, bearing the spring-like impulse of renewal. A world that is authentic and free from falsity stands in direct correspondence to the nihilism of modernity disclosed by Nietzsche.

The “Xugua” 序卦 chapter in the *Zhouyi* gives this “return” a clear direction: “*Jin* 晉 means advancing. Advancing is bound to involve injury; therefore it is followed by ‘Mingyi’ 明夷. *Yi* means injury. One who is injured outside must return to their family; therefore it is followed by ‘jiaren’ 家人.”¹⁶ This family is not necessarily the family of practical, everyday life; it can also be understood as family as a philosophical concept. We may understand “returning to the family” as the direction of modernity’s redemption: a plan of salvation without a savior, grounded in an existential structure disclosed through a primordial relation. The individual is no longer left wandering without support because the supersensible world has been “emptied out” within a dualistic structure; rather, the individual must “return” to the family from which they came into being.

5 Echoes of Family in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy

From the perspective of the cultural tradition of the Chinese-speaking world, the power of salvation points toward returning to the root and returning to the

15 Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, annot. Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 46.1218.

16 Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫, *Zhouyi yizhu* 周易譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 313.

family. If we examine Western philosophy through this lens, a path of salvation oriented toward family likewise comes into view.

Hegel keenly grasped the predicament of the “individual-subject” and revealed the “lack” of the individual from the perspective of affect. He criticized the internal limitations contained in the Enlightenment’s definition of the individual through reason, and disclosed the deep “attachment” of the individual at the emotional level. It is precisely this emotional attachment of the individual that makes the union of two “individuals” possible. This “lack” is not a characteristic of the rational individual; the rational individual is independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient. Only affect enables the family to become a whole.¹⁷ Hegel seeks to redeem the limitations of the individual through “love” and to define the meaning of family through “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). In Hegel’s scheme, however, family is only the starting point of ethical society; in the end, the ultimate task of “salvation” is assigned to the level of the “state.”

Heidegger interprets the modern condition of “homelessness” from the standpoint of human existence, revealing through “anxiety” (*Angst*) the state of “homelessness” of *Dasein* (*cizai* 此在) in its being-in-the-world. “In anxiety one feels ‘uncanny.’ Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which *Dasein* finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the ‘nothing and nowhere.’”¹⁸ “Feeling uncanny” refers precisely to “not-being-at-home.” In “anxiety,” *Dasein* discovers that it has no intrinsic meaning of its own and is, in essence, “homeless.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses the state of “being at home” in a negative tone. In his later philosophy, however, he offers another account of home, understanding “returning to the family” as the movement of beings toward the nearness of being. Yet Heidegger understands home only as a kind of “dwelling place” of *Dasein*; he does not grasp the authentic elements that make a home a home.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) offers a sharp critique of Heidegger’s *Dasein*. For Levinas, home becomes a “dwelling,” a “place of habitation,” a place where alterity is preserved. At the same time, through “eros” he reveals the primordially of home. The “ambiguity” of “eros” exceeds the logic of being. “Eros” gestates new possibility and a relation to the future: this is “fecundity,” which means the birth of the child.¹⁹ From this, Levinas explains the problem of

17 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 164.

18 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 233.

19 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 152–268.

“generationality” through the “father-son” relation, and a universal ethics of fraternity through the “brother” relation.

The psychoanalytic tradition reveals the inner relationship between the individual and the family, and discusses, from a negative angle, the importance of family for the development of individual personality. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) disclosed the formative role of family relations in the individual unconscious; Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) regarded the family as an important source of the collective unconscious; Melanie Klein (1882–1960), Donald Woods Winnicott (1896–1971), and others focused on psychological development within the family, revealing the ambivalent feelings between children and parents and showing how an internalised family structure profoundly shapes individual growth.²⁰

Contemporary feminism is also an important theoretical force on the topic of family. In feminist accounts, the modern “individual-subject” is essentially constructed from a male perspective. The man as individual engages in “public” undertakings, but the individual himself grows up within the family as a private sphere. It is precisely because of women’s devotion and care that the individual is possible at all. Feminism therefore calls for a renewed and gender-inclusive examination of family.

Among contemporary Chinese philosophers, Yang Xiaosi 楊效斯 and Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍 (1949–2022) were pioneers in drawing attention to the absence of a “philosophy of family” within the Western philosophical tradition. Yang Xiaosi constructed an ontology, ethics, and epistemology of family. Zhang Xianglong used phenomenological methods to interpret the originary meaning of family, discussing the possibility of family through the “temporality of filial piety” and placing particular emphasis on the parent-child relation. I highly value the contributions of modern and contemporary philosophers to the “philosophy of family,” yet their work also has its respective limitations. Whether in Hegel’s sense of the family or Heidegger’s sense of “dwelling,” “generationality” is omitted. Although Levinas’s analysis of “eros,” psychoanalysis, and feminism each touch upon “generationality,” they ultimately do not penetrate deeply into the questions of *shengsheng* 生生 (generative continuity) and *qinqin* 親親 (affective kinship).

With respect to *shengsheng*, I have established such key existential moments as “being within generations” and “being toward future generations,”

20 Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

using *shengsheng* to supplement the limitations of “being-toward-death.”²¹ With respect to *qinqin*, I compare it with “eros,” “friendship,” and “agape,” which have been valued in Western philosophy, and emphasize that “love begins with kinship,” taking a form of love grounded in family as the prototype of love. The “philosophy of family” reveals another dimension entirely different from the philosophy of the “individual-subject”: another form of “ontology” distinct from the individual. The affective, relational, generational, continuous, and responsibility-bearing dimensions of the existential structure of human beings have thereby been further clarified.

6 Returning to a “Nurturing Lifeworld”

The world of modernity, founded upon the “individual-subject,” faces the prospect of nihilism. To ask “how can we return to the family” is, first of all, to dismantle at the ontological level the metaphysical basis from which nihilism arises, restoring an ontology of family so as to achieve the redemption of modernity and return to a Nurturing Lifeworld.

In terms of ontological structure, the Western philosophical tradition is built upon an ontology that studies “being,” forming a dualistic structure of the “sensible versus supersensible” and “this world versus the beyond.” With the “death of God,” the collapse of the transcendental dimension allows “nothingness” to enter through the breach. The Chinese-speaking world offers an alternative possibility for the structure of the world, expressed in the formulation “ceaseless generation is what is meant by *yi*” (*shengsheng zhi wei yi* 生生之謂易). This is not a “dualistic world,” but an “integrated world” in which the three powers of Heaven, Earth, and humanity are gathered together. The “ontology of family” is closely related to this metaphysical presupposition of an “integrated world.” Following the Chinese-speaking world’s line of thought that “the Way is not far from human beings,” the “sense of meaning” is not constructed through a transcendent God, but is extended outward from fundamental emotions close at hand. The meaning of existence therefore begins from what is near and expands from there. Family is precisely the prototype of unceasing *shengsheng*, and it provides an inexhaustible source of value.

At the existential level, “returning to the family” means returning to the smallest unit of humanity’s capacity for “grouping.” The individual is an irreducible substantialized concept; family is the smallest unit of humanity’s

21 Sun Xiangchen 孫向晨, “Shengsheng: zai shidai zhizhong cunzai” 生生：在世代之中存在, *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 10 (2018): 113–25.

capacity to form groups, an irreducible relational concept. Together, these form the “dual ontology” upon which human existence depends.²² Human beings can affirm two basic existential facts: every individual grows as an individual, and the individual possesses freedom and autonomy that cannot be erased; yet “the body, hair, and skin are received from one’s parents,” which reveals the priority of family over the individual in actuality.

Family has its own unique structure, irreducible to the individual. It constitutes the three most basic relations of human beings: the distinction between male and female, generational connection, and the affection between brothers and sisters. The interplay of these relations is the very foundation of human existence. The structure of family differs from the Heideggerian structure of “being-with” (*Mitsein*). Heidegger invariably sets family in opposition to the authentic individual. “Being at home” is always a form of evasion and inauthenticity. Heidegger regards any world beyond the individual as the public world of “the they” (*das Man*) and evaluates it negatively. This is itself a manifestation of the absence of family as an ontological category. As a mode of “being-with,” family forms a kind of “shared” co-existence. The relation between family and its members is not a simple mechanical aggregation of individuals, but an organic connection between whole and parts.

On the basis of the ontological structure of the family, a set of axiological norms also arises, generating a series of positive values such as kinship, holding and containment, filial piety and fraternal respect, benevolence and love, loyalty, responsibility, identity, and harmony. Between the public world of “the they” and the individual *Dasein*, there is an important link entirely neglected by Heidegger: the “world of affective kinship” (*qinqin de shijie* 親親的世界). Through *qinqin*, “being in the world” tends to move beyond self-centredness and enter the state of “being at home.” The family is not a public world into which *Dasein* flees in order to avoid homelessness; rather, it is the “originary world” from which *Dasein* emerges. Authentic *Dasein* is first of all already at home; being at home possesses “primordially.” The three basic relations of family guide human beings toward different modes of love, cultivating the love between husband and wife, the love between parent and child, and the love between siblings. The most crucial significance of family for human

22 Sun Xiangchen introduced the concept of the “dual ontology” in *Lun jia: geti yu qinqin* 論家：個體與親親 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2019); there, the discussion was conducted in the context of shaping the value-form of modern China. The “dual ontology” as used here is oriented more toward the universal existential condition of humanity.

beings is that it provides a starting point for human existence and offers it a direction.

At the level of the lifeworld, “returning to the family” means restoring the sunlit dimension of the world, its nurturing character. Heidegger analyses the way moods disclose the world in its totality; “anxiety” reveals the “darkness” of the world as a whole. *Qinqin*, by contrast, reveals that “this body” is, from the very beginning, bathed in the “holding” of love.²³ We may say: “Home is where the world begins.” For the Chinese-speaking world, *Dasein* is not “thrown”; *qinqin* is itself the ground of existence. *Dasein* is not only “being-in-the-world,” but also “being-between-generations,” held within the embrace of generations.

According to the explanation in *Shuowen jiezi gulin* 說文解字詁林, the character 家 does not contain 豕 beneath 宀, but should instead contain 亥. “In ancient script, 亥 was written as 豕 … 亥 signifies a man and a woman begetting a child; if this is not home/family, what is?”²⁴ (In Chinese, 家 can mean both home and family.) The original meaning of home/family is a “dwelling” provided for “a man and a woman begetting a child.” In the Chinese intellectual tradition, home/family is first of all not the spatial “dwelling place” of the “individual *Dasein*,” as Heidegger understands it; nor is it merely the co-presence of a man and a woman, as in Levinas’s understanding of the home. Family originates in the cherishing of *qinqin* affection and in the bearing of future generations. *Jia* 家 as family is prior to home as “homeland” or “dwelling.” It is precisely because there is the memory of *qinqin* that the homeland or dwelling feels so intimate to the individual.

In a world understood through the family unit, the mother-child relation within *qinqin* appears especially fundamental. Giorgio Agamben fully appreciates the important role of the “infant” in our perception of the world. The experience of *qinqin* undergone by human beings as “infants” has a certain “transcendental” effect throughout their lives.²⁵ In the Chinese-speaking world, Mencius likewise placed special emphasis on the significance of the “heart of the newborn child” (*chizi zhixin* 赤子之心). This experience of the “infant” first comes from the mother. In Luo Rufang’s 羅汝芳 (1515–1588) description, “When a newborn emerges from the womb, its very first cry is nothing other than a longing

23 The term “holding” is borrowed from Winnicott’s psychoanalytic vocabulary; see D. W. Winnicott, *Holding and Interpretation: Fragment of an Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986).

24 Ding Fubao 丁福保, *Shuowen jiezi gulin* 說文解字詁林 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 3027.

25 Ji’aoqiao Agamben 吉奧喬·阿甘本 [Giorgio Agamben], *Younian yu lishi* 幼年與歷史, trans. Yin Xing 尹星 (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2016), 66.

for the mother's embrace."²⁶ The mother's embrace is precisely the prototype of the "Nurturing Lifeworld," a response to the "individual's" need for attachment. "This body" is first of all held within the nurturing embrace of *qinqin*. The "world of *qinqin*" is more primordial and more fundamental than "anxiety," and it naturally has the power to resist the spread of such "anxiety." This is the most originary feeling of the world, and the initial countenance of the world is thereby revealed.

Our closeness to others, and our sympathy and fellow-feeling (*tongqing gonggan* 同情共感) with others, are also established from this basis. From *qinqin* comes closeness (*qinjin* 親近), and this is also what the Chinese-speaking world often calls the "Way of loyalty and reciprocity" (*zhongshu zhidao* 忠恕之道), a power that "draws the world near." *Qinqin* is an originary, concrete, and direct feeling of love. It is not in fact confined to blood relations; it merely appears in life in its most direct and primordial form through blood relations. In essence, it is possible to establish sympathy from *qinqin*, and then to establish relations of "closeness" with others and relations of trust between persons. This sense of intimacy enables the nurturing character of family to be transmitted to the world. In a certain sense, this is a process of "home-making" the world, from which the Chinese-speaking world gives rise to the ideal of "all under Heaven as one family" (*tianxia yijia* 天下一家).

Family is the world in which human beings exist primordially. The relation between mother and child forms the nurturing ground tone of existence, while the father establishes within it a certain public symbolic system. The family structure is precisely the originary foundation upon which the world can be constructed. Thus, as Novalis says, human existence everywhere contains an impulse to return home. Through "returning to the family," the individual once again feels the love of *qinqin*, an originary emotional experience. Placed within an environment sheltered by family, the individual continues into a world of unceasing generative continuity. Only in this way can we overcome the intrusion of modern nihilism and "return" to a Nurturing Lifeworld.

Heidegger fundamentally overlooks the crucial point that "the body, hair, and skin are received from one's parents." He lacks, in an overall sense, the dimension of "being within generations," and also lacks any portrayal of the "world of *qinqin*." The "state of being at home" is not inauthentic; "innate moral knowledge and capacity" can supplement the meaning of "resoluteness," while "being-toward-life" can make up for the finitude of "being-toward-death." A world lacking these important dimensions is inevitably cold. The importance of the love of

26 Luo Ruffang ji 羅汝芳集, ed. Fang Zuyou 方祖猷 et al. (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 1: 74.

qinqin does not lie in its being the whole of the “lifeworld,” but in its being the starting point of the “lifeworld.” *Qinqin* is a love that can be “extended outward”; it is “like the first kindling of fire, the first flowing of a spring.”²⁷ Through a starting point that is within reach, a “world-forming” world is sustained. The “Nurturing Lifeworld” begins from *qinqin*.

Translated by Epperly Zhang

27 Jiao Xun 焦循, *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義, annot. Shen Wenzhuo 沈文倬 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 7:235.