



Rorty, Pragmatism, and Confucianism

WITH RESPONSES BY RICHARD RORTY

Edited by Yong Huang

This page intentionally left blank.

*Rorty, Pragmatism,
and Confucianism*

SUNY SERIES IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Roger T. Ames, editor

Rorty, Pragmatism, and Confucianism

With Responses by Richard Rorty

EDITED BY
YONG HUANG

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Cover photo: Norris Pope

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
ALBANY

© 2009 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Kelli W. LeRoux
Marketing by Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rorty, pragmatism, and Confucianism : with responses by Richard Rorty / edited by Yong Huang.

p. cm.—(Suny series in Chinese philosophy and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7683-3 (alk. paper)

1. Confucianism. 2. Pragmatism. 3. Rorty, Richard. I. Huang, Yong.

BL1853.R67 2009

181'.112—dc22

2008024764

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
1. Rorty and Confucianism: An Introduction YONG HUANG	1
PART I	
Relativity, Contingency, and Moral Progress	
2. Rorty, Confucius, and Intercultural Relativism KUANG-MING WU	21
3. On Three Contingencies in Richard Rorty: A Confucian Critique CHUNG-YING CHENG	45
4. Rorty's Progress into Confucian Truths YONG HUANG	73
PART II	
Morality and Human Nature	
5. A Comparative Examination of Rorty's and Mencius's Theories of Human Nature PEIMIN NI	101
6. Rorty and Mencius on Family, Nature, and Morality JAMES BEHUNIAK JR.	117

7. Rorty Meets Confucius: A Dialogue Across Millenia 129
ROBERT ELLIOTT ALLINSON

PART III

Postmodernism: Community, Literature, and Value

8. A Confucian Response to Rorty's Postmodern
Bourgeois Liberal Idea of Community 161
SOR-HOON TAN
9. Philosophy and Literature: Rorty and Confucianism 181
HANS-GEORG MOELLER
10. Coping with Incommensurable Pursuits: Rorty, Berlin,
and the Confucian-Daoist Complementarity 195
CHENYANG LI

PART IV

The "Other": Nature, Reality, and Transcendence

11. Rortian Extremes and the Confucian *Zhongyong* 213
MAJORIE C. MILLER
12. Tradition and Transcendence in Masters Kong and Rorty 227
KELLY JAMES CLARK
13. Becoming Practically Religious: A Deweyan and
Confucian Context for Rortian Religiousness 255
ROGER T. AMES

PART V

Responses

14. Responses to Critics 279
RICHARD M. RORTY
- Glossary 301
- Contributors 309
- Index 313

Acknowledgments

Chapters of this book originated from selected papers, presented at the two-day international conference on “Rorty, Pragmatism, and Chinese Philosophy,” held at the beautiful campus of East China Normal University (ECNU), Shanghai, in July 2004. I am most grateful for the generous support of my friend and undergraduate classmate, Professor Yang Guorong, Director of ECNU’s Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture, which sponsored the conference. I also gratefully thank and am indebted to another friend and undergraduate classmate, Professor Tong Shijun, then the associate director of the institute and now the Vice President of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. He was responsible for putting the whole conference together.

The two-day conference was the culminating event of Professor Richard Rorty’s month-long lecture tour in China. I must express my gratitude to Professor Li He, also my friend and graduate classmate, editor of the prestigious journal *World Philosophy*, at the Institute of Philosophy of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing, for planning and arranging the tour. I send thanks to the following institutions for their invitations, warm receptions, and lively discussions: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, School of the Central Committee of Communist Party in China (all in Beijing), Nankai University (Tianjin), Heilongjiang University (Harbin), Shanxi University (Taiyuan), Xi’an Jiaotong University (Xi’an), East China Normal University, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, *Wenhui Daily*, and Fudan University (Shanghai). We had wonderful experiences in each of these places, also due to the efforts of my friend, Professor Huo Guihuan, from the Institute of Philosophy of CASS. He not only worked with Professor Li He to plan the whole trip but also accompanied us until the last leg of the lecture tour, Shanghai, my hometown.

Thanks for cooperation and support are due to all participants at the conference, particularly the authors of papers selected for inclusion in this volume. Every author has made at least two major revisions since the conference, and so the chapters published here are significantly different from their original

conference form. I particularly thank Professors Chung-ying Cheng, Robert Allinson, Warren Frisina, and Marjorie Miller for their willing participation at an earlier panel on “Rorty and Confucianism,” sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, at APA’s Eastern Division Meeting in Washington, DC, in December 2003. I organized the panel as an experiment and its success encouraged me to proceed with the conference at ECNU the following summer.

Of course, the project would have gone nowhere without the generous and consistent support of Richard Rorty. I first met Professor Rorty on his initial trip to China in 1984, when he lectured at Fudan University, where I was a graduate student. We have since kept in touch. After coming to the United States in 1988 as a visiting scholar at Harvard-Yenching Institute, I spent a semester with him in 1999 at the University of Virginia. I have subsequently tried to read each of his new publications, and with each one I have learned something new. When I asked him, with some hesitancy (given his busy schedule and the hot summer weather in China), whether he was willing to make another China trip, he agreed instantly. What moved me most is a remembrance from our arrival at the Hongqiao Airport in Shanghai. We had flown from Xi’an and were about to begin the final leg of the lecture tour and attend the conference. Immediately upon greeting us, one of the conference organizers handed Professor Rorty the entire stack of conference papers, asking him to read them all and prepare responses to deliver at the end of the conference. This seemed to me an almost impossible task, but Professor Rorty graciously accepted. He carefully read and prepared written response to each paper and spent the whole afternoon of the second day of the conference making responses and replying to new questions raised by authors of the papers he had responded to. These responses and replies have proven most beneficial to all the contributors who revised their papers for inclusion in this volume. When the final chapters arrived, Professor Rorty again spent weeks reading and writing much more detailed responses to each one. It was most unfortunate that Professor Rorty left us before seeing this volume out.

I also want to extend my thanks to Kutztown University of Pennsylvania for providing me with a research grant to partially cover the editorial costs of this volume; to Professor John Lizza, the chair of our department, for his unfailing support; to Professor Joanne Emge, Mrs. Laurel Delaney, and Mr. Andrew Earley for copy editing, proofreading, and other editorial assistance; to Professor Peimin Ni for his creating the list of index terms; and to Professor Roger T. Ames for his willingness to include this volume in the series he edits.

My contribution to this volume in chapter 4, “Rorty’s Progress into Confucian Truths” and Rorty’s response to it in chapter 14 are reprinted by permission of the Library of Living Philosophers from *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, edited by Randall E. Auxier and Lewis E. Hahn, Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 32 (Chicago: Open Court, 2009).

Yong Huang

❧ 1 ❧

Rorty and Confucianism

An Introduction

YONG HUANG

Rorty begins his “Preface” to one Chinese volume of his collected essays, *Post-Metaphysical Hope* (后形而上學希望), with this sentence: “The essays in this volume are attempts to follow in the footsteps of John Dewey, a philosopher whose ideas had considerable resonance in China during the first half of the twentieth century” (Rorty 2003, 1). He ends it with this short paragraph:

I am very pleased to learn that Dewey’s works are now being rapidly translated into Chinese, and that his ideas will once more be widely discussed in Chinese intellectual circles. I hope that my own writings will be read in tandem with his, and that they may serve as useful footnotes to his work. (Rorty 2003, 6)¹

As is well known, John Dewey and his pragmatism, with his lectures during his extended visit to China and many of his books translated and published in Chinese, have exerted a significant influence in China, particularly among its intellectuals. Today, many Chinese intellectuals have also become interested in Rorty and his neo-pragmatism, which can be clearly seen from the fact that Rorty’s own books are being rapidly translated and published in Chinese, and from the great enthusiasm shown during Rorty’s month-long lecture tour in China in June 2004. It is thus interesting to see that Rorty asks that his own writings be read as footnotes of John Dewey, one of his lasting heroes.

It is true that hardly any contributors to this volume are in Chinese intellectual circles, and not all of them read Rorty’s writings in tandem with Dewey’s or as useful footnotes to the latter. Nevertheless, all contributors to this volume engage Rorty in conversations with Confucianism, which has been

the most influential tradition in Chinese history and is experiencing a visible resurgence today after its decline since the May Fourth Movement. Some have found surprising similarities, while others notice unignorable differences; some try to use Confucianism to modify Rorty's ideas, while others try to appropriate Rorty's philosophy to update Confucianism. In this introduction, instead of providing a summary of each of these contributions, I shall identify a few overlapping themes among them, from which, I believe, dialogue between Rorty and Confucianism can bear most fruitful results.

MORALITY

Despite Rorty's repeated disclaimers regarding his ignorance of Confucianism (especially when he finds different people, including contributors to this volume, presenting different pictures of Confucianism, see 297)² and his perceived dissimilarities between his philosophy and Confucianism (see 298), many contributors have found some surprising similarities between his philosophy and Confucianism, particularly in their conceptions of morality.

One important aspect is the nature of morality. Rorty argues against the philosophical tradition from Plato to Kant that creates a dichotomy between reason (universal, unselfish, and representing one's true self) and sentiment (particular, selfish, and representing one's false self). According to this tradition, morality should be based on universal reason rather than sentimental feeling, and philosophy can provide "an argument that will convince even Nazis and Mafiosi if they just think hard and long enough" (Rorty 2004, 205). In contrast, Rorty appeals to the moral tradition of David Hume, which takes "sentiment, and indeed sentimentality, as central to the moral consciousness" (Rorty 1999, 76). Thus, instead of distinguishing between humans and animals by saying that the former know while the latter can only feel, Rorty says that the difference is only that "we can feel *for each other* to a much greater extent than they can" (Rorty 1998a, 176).³

The similarity between Rorty and Confucianism in this respect is obvious. For Confucianism, *ren* (humanity) is the most important value, and yet, "[F]ilial piety and brotherly love are the root of *ren*" (*Analects* 1.2); "[T]he most important aspect of *ren* is to love your family members" (*Zhongyong* 20); and, "[L]oving one's parents is *ren*" (*Mencius* 7a15). The reason, as perfectly explained by Rorty, is that when such family love (parental love and the trust such love creates in the child) is absent, we get sociopaths (Rorty 1999, 78). It is in this sense that, in his contribution, Allinson claims that

Rorty is already a Confucian, for this is exactly the position of Mencius. Mencius provides just the story that Rorty calls for as a "good basis for ethical attitudes." Mencius's story is one in which the reader is asked to imaginatively identify with someone who is observing a child about to fall into a well. (129)

James Behuniak interprets the Mozi-Mencius debate also in this context: Mozi is a quasi-Kantian as he “introduces something like a reason-sentiment distinction when he maligns the ‘partiality’ (*bie* 別) of Confucian family sentiment and makes a more rational appeal for adopting his doctrine of ‘universal concern’ (*jianai* 兼愛); in contrast, Behuniak points out, “Mencius rejects this move, insisting that moral feeling always remain rooted (*ben* 本) in family loyalties” (118).⁴

This relates to another similarity between Rorty and Confucianism. Since morality is inseparable from sentimental feeling, moral progress for Rorty is not achieved through the replacement of sentimental feeling by universal reason. In contrast, it is done by gradually extending our sentimental feeling to those whom we originally do not regard as part of us, and toward whom we do not have such sentimental feeling. It is in this sense that Rorty emphasizes that moral progress is an expansion of the circle of “us”:

in the direction set by certain events in the past—the inclusion among “us” of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and perhaps, last of all, of the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work). (Rorty 1989, 196)

As we have seen, in Confucianism, filial piety is the root of humanity. However, as Peimin Ni points out, Rorty’s passage above reminds us of such Confucian statements as, “[A] youth, when at home, should be filial, and abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all” (*Analects* 1.6); “[T]reat the aged of our own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat our own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families” (*Mencius* 1a7) (108). In addition, the *Great Learning* description of moral progress from cultivation of personal life, to regulation of the family, to the ordering of the state, and finally to the peace of the world is also presented in such a form expansion of “us.” This is because, as I point out in my own contribution, the Confucian idea of filial piety as the root of humanity means that

[f]irst, the natural affection within a family is the starting point of moral life and therefore is something to be cherished rather than abandoned; second, it is only the beginning and not the end of moral life. Therefore, to be a moral person, one cannot be satisfied with such a natural affection within family. Instead, one needs to extend such affection beyond the family to other human beings and even other living beings. (76)

Closely related to such an understanding, there is a third similarity between Rorty and Confucianism, as identified by Ni: both “pay special attention to the function of stories and poems in awakening people’s sensitivity to others’ pains and humiliation. . . . [S]tories and poems work directly with

emotions and sympathy” (107).⁵ In Rorty’s view, to make moral progress, to expand the scope of “us,” and to extend our moral feeling to strangers, it is best to tell “the sort of long, sad, sentimental story that begins, ‘Because this is what it is like to be in her situation—to be far from home, among strangers,’ or ‘Because she might become your daughter-in-law,’ or ‘Because her mother would grieve for her’” (Rorty 1998a, 185). For Rorty, his emphasis on storytelling is “about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status” (Rorty 1998a, 172). In other words, the reason we need storytelling rather than logical reasoning in making moral progress has nothing to do with any meta-ethical issues. It is simply because the moral progresses human beings have made so far “owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories” (Rorty 1998a, 172).

To show the similarity between Rorty and Confucianism, in his contribution, Wu points out that the storytelling that Rorty emphasizes so much is central to Confucianism. In his view,

thinking in Confucius is story-thinking, thinking by telling one mini-story after another, as stories link/relate matters of life, to relate life-thinking to them. Confucius “story-argues” to refute antilife approaches and to rally to the pro-life posture, thereby composing an enormous history that tells the triumphs of pro-life story-ideas (Confucianism) as it confesses to the tragic antilife practices in time. (29)

In Wu’s view, such story-thinking has three features: It is coherent; it opens sinuously to whatever is in actuality; and it relates things that happen to situations to make history (27).

Making a similar point, Moeller points out the fact that, in Chinese classics, there is no explicit distinction between philosophical writing and literature. For example,

[A]mong the Confucian texts, the *Xunzi* 荀子 is a collection of outstanding essays while the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子) are in large part collections of dialogues or miniature dramas. . . . Literature and philosophy were not seen as distinct genres but were implicitly understood as mutually dependent. Being introduced into the canon of scriptures usually meant an ennobling of a work’s content as well as of its literary perfection. (185)

We have seen that, for Rorty, storytelling is important not because of its metaphysical or epistemological quality but because of its practical efficaciousness. Similarly, as Moeller points out, when Confucian philosophy is thus literalized, on the one hand, “the Confucians equated the refinement in literature with the personal refinement of the ‘philosopher’ and his or her adaptation to the natural harmony” (187). This is related to the creators of Confucian literature. On the other hand, Confucians also see literature as a tool to carry out the Confucian project of moral cultivation for the readers of Confucian

literature. In this aspect, Moeller cites the following important passage from the *Analects*:

Reciting the *Songs* can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you. (*Analects* 17.9)

HUMAN NATURE

Behind the surprising similarities between Rorty and Confucianism in their respective conceptions of morality, there also lurks a striking difference. It is true that, in order to expand the scope of “us” in our efforts to make moral progress, Rorty has repeatedly told us that we should regard the differences separating human beings from each other in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc., as morally irrelevant. Instead, we should “see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (Rorty 1998a, 181). However, he immediately adds: “The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a deep true self that instantiates true humanity, but are such little, superficial similarities as cherishing our parents and children—similarities that do not distinguish us in any interesting way from many nonhuman animals” (Rorty 1998a, 181). In other words, he denies that there is a universal human nature or, rather, that such a conception of human nature is of any use for moral progress. However, as is well known, human nature (*xing*) is a central Confucian idea closely related to the Confucian conception of morality. Of course, as this Confucian idea is subject to different interpretations, there can also be different views of the relationship between Rorty and Confucianism in this respect.

Allinson, for example, agrees that, for both Rorty and Confucius, stories, poetry, and other forms of literature are important means for moral education. However, in his view, they can perform this function only because they all have a hidden metaphysics:

To say that one learns moral lessons from literature is not adequate, for some literature (for example *Mein Kampf*) may teach immoral lessons. The notion of finding ethical lessons in literature already presupposes a philosophical criterion of which literature counts as possessing moral teaching. (157n5)

By the hidden metaphysics and the philosophical criterion, Allinson means a theory of human nature. He argues that “Confucianism . . . sets out an ethics based on compassion. Mencius states that such a feeling of sympathy resides in the potential human nature” (130). In his view, this Confucian conception of human nature is not an empirical one. If it were empirical, it could be falsified by what Rorty regards as sociopaths, people such as Eichmann who lack such

feeling of sympathy. In contrast, Allinson points out, “lacking both empirical proof and counterexample, it is a metaphysical argument. All human beings without exception will have such a feeling” (131). Moreover, such a metaphysical conception of human nature is not merely normative but also realistic. Actually, only because it is realistic can it be normative. Allinson argues that if we merely take the Confucian idea of human nature as normative, it will be not very different from the view held by Gaozi, which Allinson argues is very similar to Rorty’s view in “Philosophy-envy” (Rorty 2004a). This theory denies any inborn human nature and yet affirms that all humans can be made good. However, Allinson argues, Mencius “considers such a theory ineffective unless it supervenes upon a human nature capable of responding to such a theory. In short, Mencius must have not only ‘a theory of human nature’ but a human nature which the theory describes” (130).

A Rortian question, of course, is: How do we know humans have this metaphysical potential? Allinson responds that the best answer to this question is provided in Mencius’s example of seeing a child about to fall into a well. From Rorty’s point of view, however, this is empirical and not metaphysical. It can be falsified, at least by Eichmann, the example Allinson himself uses to show that there are people who may not be receptive to other people’s suffering. In his response, thus, Rorty expresses his twofold problem with such a metaphysical conception of human nature. First, if the goodness of human nature is a metaphysical truth and does not accept any counterexamples, then we have to “trace all examples of sociopathic personality to acculturation,” which Rorty doubts that we can do. Second, even if we could do it, we would be left with the question:

How do we know which cultures are more and which less in accordance with nature? How do we tell where empirical generalization stops and metaphysics begins? How do we know where the nature of our species stops and corruption of that nature begins? (289)

It is his (and perhaps anyone else’s) inability to draw the line between an arbitrary and non-arbitrary definition of human nature or “fully human,” Rorty acknowledges, that leads him

to think that an appeal to “metaphysical” truths is as dubious an intellectual maneuver as an invocation of divine judgment on the sons of Ham, or as an appeal to the widespread belief that sodomy is an unnatural practice. There seem to be no rules for drawing the essence-accident or metaphysical-empirical distinctions. (289)

However, on the same issue, Ni, who also focuses on Mencius’s theory, argues that the Confucian conception of human nature is not metaphysical but empirical, but he does not therefore argue that it is merely descriptive. Historically and causally, “it is descriptive in the sense that it begins with an empirical observation about whether people do have those incipient tendencies” (104).

However, functionally, “it is stipulative because . . . it is Mencius’s choice to take what is unique to humans to be human nature” (104). Ni’s interpretation is more sophisticated than it appears. On the one hand, although Mencius’s functionally stipulative conception of human nature originates from his descriptive conception,

after the empirical generalization, he takes a shift toward the opposite direction. It seems that if our experience *does* find exceptions, we should say that the people who are devoid of the tendencies are not genuinely human, instead of modifying the description. (104)

In other words, the description as empirical generalization is subject to empirical confirmation. Yet once it is confirmed, “experience appears to be no longer a relevant factor for justifying the thesis. The thesis is no longer disconfirmable” (104). On the other hand, Ni also points out,

Mencius did not first make an empirical assertion and then use a stipulative definition to make the empirical part vacuous and simply irrelevant. The empirical part is still relevant historically and causally, and history and causality are themselves not simply matters of stipulation; they are subject to empirical confirmation as well. (104)

It seems that the most controversial part remains the exceptions to normal human beings whose nature is good. In his response, Rorty states that, in Ni’s interpretation, “for Mencius, the person who displays no compassion has somehow been corrupted by an insidious influence (a tactic suggested in Robert Allinson’s chapter)” (286). If so, Ni will have the same problems that Rorty thinks Allinson has, as both claim that such a theory of human nature is empirically not disconfirmable. However, Ni does not say, at least not as clearly as Allinson does, that such abnormal persons are corrupted by an insidious influence. Ni seems to allow the possibility that they are born to be abnormal. Yet, in this case, Rorty will naturally raise the question about our definition of normal and abnormal human beings, which is obviously a stipulative and not a descriptive conception. So in Rorty’s view, either we insist that the conception of human nature is metaphysical and so not disconfirmable or that it is empirical and so disconfirmable. Ni seems to want to have both: it is empirical and yet not disconfirmable. Thus, in his response, Rorty insists on the distinction between “claims that can be empirically confirmed and those that cannot” (285). Rorty thinks that statements such as “humans have the four hearts just as they have the four limbs” and “humans are naturally good” are not empirically confirmable and so are not descriptive, which should be reserved for statements that can be empirically confirmed (285). Since such theories are not confirmable, the debate among Mencius, Xunzi, and Gaozi “is unlikely to make any practical difference” (285). Here Rorty obviously regards such statements as metaphysical and not empirical. If they were empirical, they would be disconfirmable.

To avoid possible problems Rorty may have with the Confucian conception of human nature, a couple of the contributors to this volume tend to downplay the descriptive dimension of the Confucian conception of human nature and emphasize its normativity. Behuniak, for example, argues against the essentialist interpretation of Mencius's theory of human nature, according to which human nature is "descendent from a transcendent entity" (118). Behuniak provides an alternative interpretation. In his view, for Mencius, the distinguishing feature of being human is family affection and this family affection is not part of an ahistorical human essence but a product of history (119). It is only then that Mencius uses this historical product as a normative idea. There are indeed a few apparently essentialist or ahistorical claims by Mencius (such as "Human disposition is good" and "All people have the capacity to become human"). However, in Behuniak's view, in such claims, Mencius merely says something like this: "[T]hanks to the historical work of sages, his contemporaries now live in a qualitatively 'Chinese' and 'human' world, meaning that they generally come from families and thus are the recipients of family affection at birth" (120).

Cheng, in his contribution, also emphasizes the normative conception of human nature as providing an ideal value for human beings to pursue. In this sense, in his otherwise very critical contribution, Cheng argues that "Rorty has scored an important insight" because

for Rorty, there seems to be a sense of metaphysics and moral theory that he has admitted in view of their ability to provide ends of view and norms and values of life. In this sense, a theory of human nature is objectionable because it commits us to an undesirable end, not because it is normative in intention and in use. This also means that whatever purpose of life we wish to pursue we need an understanding of human nature as a normative guide or a regulative vision. (56)

In Cheng's view, the theory of human nature developed in Confucian tradition is in this sense normative. Cheng argues that, according to Mencius, first,

human nature need not be conceived as object or essence; it is rather a matter of an experienced interest or motive in action or a propensity or disposition to act in a certain way. It is hence a reflection of our experience of what we take to be ourselves. Second, human nature can be a will to power or a fulfillment of a supreme goal in life. . . . Third, human nature is nothing other than creativity that a human person can discover. (59)

Cheng concludes that "Mencius's theory of human nature is thus very different from the account of human nature as substance that Rorty rejects. Human nature is but a power or ability for some desirable and satisfactory action, both individual and social" (59).⁶

Such an interpretation of the Confucian idea of human nature as primarily normative, if plausible, is certainly much more congenial to Rorty's idea. For

Rorty, philosophical and religious theories of human nature “should tell us what to do with ourselves. They should explain why some lives are better for human beings than other lives, and why some societies are superior to others. A theory of human nature should tell us what sort of people we ought to become” (Rorty 2004a, 18). As we can see, according to this normative interpretation, the Confucian theory of human nature does precisely such a job. In his response to Behuniak, Rorty thus points out sympathetically that, if we accept Behuniak’s interpretation, when we know that somebody like Xie “lifted the hominids who were the ancestors of the Chinese out of a ‘sociopathic’ state of nature,”

we shall not explain, as Robert Allinson presumably would, that Xie was able to do this because he had an insight into the “nature” of those hominids. One will just say that he had a good idea. It was good because it paid off: its deployment was a necessary causal condition for the existence of people like us, the paradigmatic good guys. (287)

Nevertheless, Rorty would think that even such a normative idea of “human nature” has outgrown its usage. This is so because, in his view, it was useful only because it “marketed helpful moral and political advice in a fancy, disposable package” (Rorty 2004a), and yet now it is time for us, while keeping such advice, to dispose of the package. In his view,

[A]ttempts to back up considered political judgments about what should be done with appeals to religious or philosophical facts are pointless gestures. This is because the appeals are at least as controversial as the original judgments. Everybody is able to concoct a religion or a metaphysics that suits his antecedent moral or political view. (Rorty 2006, 90)

THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

One of the most distinctive ideas that Rorty has developed since his publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is the distinction between the public and the private. Against both traditional metaphysics that tries to fuse the public and the private into a single vision and contemporary historical thinkers who regard the two as antithetical, Rorty asks us “to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable” (Rorty 1989, xiii). By the separation of public and private, Rorty means that

my private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated. (Rorty 1989, 91–92)

In his view, when public and private are thus separated, we can aim at an ideal society that lets “its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as

they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged” (Rorty 1989, xiv).

Li, Tan, and Cheng, in their respective contributions to this volume, are in concert in their criticism of Rorty’s separation of public and private. According to Li, Rorty’s view underestimates the tension or even conflict between an individual’s private and public pursuits, because they “compete for ‘space’ in a person’s life in such a way that, at some point of the process, the increase of one necessitates the decrease of the other” (197): to be more like Rorty’s exemplars of self-creation implies being less like those of human solidarity, and vice versa (197). Tan agrees. In her view, to spend time, energy, and other resources on one’s private pursuit of self-creation means that one will have less time, energy, and other resources to spend on one’s public pursuit of social justice (173).

To a criticism similar to the one made by Li and Tan, Rorty once explained in an interview:

What I had in mind in making the distinction was this: the language of citizenship, of public responsibility, of participation in the affairs of the state, is not going to be an original, self-created language. Some people, the ones we think of as poets or makers, want to invent a new language—because they want to invent a new self. And there’s a tendency to try to see that poetic effort as synthesizable with the activity of taking part in public discourse. I don’t think the two are synthesizable. (Rorty 2006, 50)

In other words, Rorty has a different concern from Li and Tan when he advocates the separation of private and public: if a person’s private pursuit is, for example, Christian faith, to regard such a private pursuit as in one piece with one’s public pursuit for social justice will inevitably result in cruelty as evidenced by inquisition and other actions of religious oppression. In this context, to realize one’s pursuit in Christian faith as something merely private has something positive for the public: it leaves other individuals free to pursue their own private forms of self-creation. It is in this sense that we can say that one’s pursuits in self-creation and in social justice are simultaneously realized. This is true, however, only if we are limited to a negative sense of social justice: not to impose one’s private vision of self-creation upon others. Yet, Rorty’s own sense of social justice also includes positively reducing cruelty and increasing happiness. In this sense, social justice cannot be obtained simply by causing no harm to others; rather, it requires one to devote time, energy, and other resources to promote it, which may have nothing to do with one’s private vision of self-creation. It is in such cases that I think Li and Tan’s criticism is to be taken seriously.

While Li and Tan share their criticism of Rorty, they propose different alternatives. Realizing the serious tension and even conflict between one’s private and public pursuits, Li develops his Confucian-Daoist model of complementarity to bring these two pursuits together. According to this model, two different value systems, for example, those represented by Confucianism

and Daoism respectively, do not contain entirely different values. In contrast, they often contain many common values. They are different value systems simply because they “prioritize values differently” and so they “realize alternative ways of life” (205). Because of this, these two different value systems are complementary:

Prioritizing a value may give a value system strength in one situation, but its correlative de-prioritization of a competing or opposing value may well be its weakness in another situation. . . . This is the ground for having both to play different roles and to complement each other in society. (206)

To illustrate this Confucian-Daoist complementarity, Li mentions Tao Yuan-ming, who first pursues a Confucian life and later a Daoist life. In Li’s view, Rorty’s two values, self-creation and social justice, should be integrated into a single value system in the same way, with different prioritizations in different situations.

In his response, Rorty’s main doubt about Li’s assigning priorities to values is its utility, whether when we are engaging leisured contemplation of alternative lives (as to be a soldier or a nun) or are faced with an urgent moral dilemma (as to desert either our spouse or our love). In the former case, “We make decisions about what sort of life to lead not by asking whether this virtue or value outranks that, but by asking whether this sort of person is more admirable than that” (294). In the latter case, “It seems more plausible to think of him as asking ‘will I be able to live with myself if . . . ?’ or ‘how will I ever be able to explain . . . ?’ rather than ‘Which value outranks which?’” (294).

Instead of the complementarity between self-creation and social justice, the solution Tan proposes to what she sees as Rorty’s problematic view of the private and the public is simply to hold the horn of the public. In Tan’s view, a Confucian cannot be a liberal ironist if that means having to give up “the attempt to unite one’s private ways of dealing with one’s finitude and one’s sense of obligation to other human beings” (173). The reason is that “time, energy, and other resources spent on socially useless private pursuits could be spent differently to benefit the community as well as the individual. The distribution of resources and the social arrangements that provide contexts for human lives are public matters” (173). Of course, Tan argues that Confucians, including Confucius himself, are tolerant of people pursuing private interests. However, such pursuits are “only possible in a community governed well by those who lead with virtue and rites rather than edicts and punishments, who care more for the people than for their own power and wealth” (174). In Tan’s view, “[T]he luxury of being able to retreat to a ‘private club’ reduces the incentive of working toward one’s social hopes, of realizing a just public order. A Confucian would be less concerned with privacy, more concerned with improving and extending the community” (174).

To this, Rorty responds that private pursuit may indeed reduce the incentive for social justice,

but it may also recharge the batteries and send the social reformer back into the world (or down into the cave) with redoubled energy. However, the question of private versus public is not just a matter of distributing one's energy. It is also a matter of the nature of the utopian society, the development of which one is hoping to further. (291)

Regarding "the nature of the utopian society," Rorty explains, is to make as large a space for individual choice as possible. In this sense he makes a contrast between Confucianism and his pragmatism: "[I]n the Confucian tradition, as I understand it, a just public order is an end in itself. In the pragmatist tradition, it is a means to the development of individuals in their full uniqueness, a way of facilitating individual self-creation" (291). I think the crucial question that Rorty tries to pose here is: Is the social hope of a Confucian reformer to help individuals to develop their full uniqueness and facilitate their individual creation or to fight for a common cause that is in addition to and other than the cause each individual pursues? In other words, is the common goal all Confucian reformers try to reach simply to maximize the possibilities of all individuals to pursue their distinctive goals or a common goal in addition to it? If a Confucian's answer is the former, there will be no significant difference between a Confucian and a Rortian.

In his contribution, Cheng provides a third alternative to Rorty's ideal of the liberal ironist who separates the public and the private: their synthesis. In Cheng's view, "[M]y decision to fight injustice could be the same decision to pursue my own happiness, and they are not necessarily incompatible" (47). Rorty, of course, acknowledges this possibility in "those lucky people for whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice" (Rorty 1999, 13). However, in Rorty's view, for most people, these two pursuits are separate. But Cheng is not content with the contingent existence of such lucky people. It is possible and desirable for everyone to become like them. Here, Cheng reminds us of Kant's argument for supreme good in which happiness and good will are united on the presupposition of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (47). In this respect, however, I think it fares even better if we look for a paradigm of such a synthesis in the person of Confucius at age seventy, when he acts on the desires of his heart without trespassing the boundary of morality. It has been the goal of Confucian self-cultivation that one finds joy in moral actions, just as a parent finds joy in taking care of her newborn baby, so that one can perform moral actions naturally without any need to overcome one's inclination. In other words, in Confucianism, the synthesis of public and private pursuits is not merely a contingent fact that happens to some "lucky" people. It is rather the goal of moral cultivation. Rorty, however, still resists such an idea of synthesis, not simply because he thinks that it is an empirical fact that the two do not coincide for most people; but more importantly because they "need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so" (Rorty 1999, 13).

RELIGION

Religion is another area in which several contributors to this volume have found it fruitful to compare and contrast Confucianism and Rorty. Different conclusions are reached, as there are different understandings of Confucian and (to a lesser extent) of Rorty's views of religion.

Clark argues that Confucius self-consciously aligns himself with the golden traditions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and this is a tradition, Clark emphasizes, that is not only religious but also theistic. Thus, in his view, Confucius believes in an anthropomorphic Heavenly Emperor, *Tian* (heaven). He cites *Analects* 2.4 where Confucius claims that he understood Heaven's mandate at the age of fifty and thereafter he was able to follow his heart's desire, which was to accord with Heaven's mandate. In Clark's view, this shows that one's learning is aimed at understanding and acting, with ease, according to the decrees of Heaven. Clark argues that Confucius's belief in Heaven as something transcendent is further supported by many other *Analects* passages, such as 7.23, where Confucius claims that Heaven itself has endowed him with virtue; 6.28, where Confucius requests that Heaven punish him if he does anything wrong; 9.6, where Confucius says that if Heaven does not intend that a culture perish, then no one can do anything with it; and 8.18, where Confucius claims that Yao is great because he modeled himself on the great Heaven. Thus, after carefully examining, rejecting the common understanding of, and reinterpreting several passages, such as *Analects* 3.12 and 5.13, that seem to run counter to Confucius's emphasis on the transcendence of Heaven, Clark concludes that the Heaven that Confucius believes in is "god like, perhaps in a way that invites comparison to the Western sense" (238).

In his interpretation of Confucius as theistic, Clark also criticizes David Hall and Roger Ames's rejection of transcendence in Confucius. In Hall and Ames's view, the Confucian *Tian* is not equitable to the Western conception of deity, because it is primarily not transcendent but unqualified immanent. Confucius cannot be a theist, as claimed by Clark. However, in his contribution to this volume, Ames argues that, while not a theist, Confucius is religious. Here he adopts Dewey's conception of the religious to connote "the sense of the connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe" (262). In Ames's view, this sense of the religious is "an 'a-theistic' yet still religious naturalism that has no need for positing the existence of a supernatural being" (264). It is in this sense that Ames argues that there is a Confucian religiousness, which is the "celebration of the human capacity to create meaning and to realize its world, describing the consummatory human being as fully a co-creator with the heavens and the earth in the emergent order of the cosmos" (267). In Ames's view,

[C]lassical Confucianism is at once a-theistic, and profoundly religious. It is a religious tradition without a God; a religious sensibility that affirms a spirituality that emerges out of inspired human experience itself. There is

no church (except for the extended family), no altars (except perhaps for the dining room table), and no clergy (except for the exemplary models deferred to as the living center of one's community). (268)

With these two different interpretations of Confucianism, as not only religious but also theistic or as a-theistic and yet religious (of course there are also people who claim that it is neither theistic nor religious), Clark and Ames have different views of the relationship between Confucius and Rorty. Since Rorty often refers to himself as "we atheists," it is quite easy for Clark to argue that Rorty and Confucius "stand in the starkest contrast" (246), with which Rorty certainly agrees. In Ames's view, however, despite his common self-description of not only "we atheists" but also "we anti-clericalists" and "we secularists," Rorty can still be regarded as religious in the Dewey-Confucian sense: not as holding "the conviction that a power that is not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good," but as keeping "the hope that we ourselves will do such good" (273). In his reply, Rorty agrees with Ames that his objections to religion are more a matter of anticlericalism than anything else. However, sensing that, in both Dewey's and Confucius's ideas of the religious, there is an idea of totality (universe or cosmos) involved, Rorty states that "I am hesitant to exalt a sense of communion with the universe in the way that Dewey did in *A Common Faith*" (299), from which Ames cites frequently in his contribution.

This also brings us to the main theme of Marjorie Miller's contribution to the volume, although Miller does not discuss the issue of religion explicitly. The main task Miller sets for herself is, against Rorty's conception of mastery of and adaptation to the biologicistic environment, to argue for both "respect and a certain sort of obedience" we owe to nature. To accomplish this goal, Miller sets an alliance between Confucianism and classical pragmatism. So, on the one hand, Miller appeals to William James and John Dewey, who "think nonhuman reality matters, and nature requires our respect" (217). On the other hand, she appeals to Confucians, particularly Xunzi, according to whom nature is "that with which we must act if we are to achieve our ends. In so far as we fail in our *respect*, in so far as we do not do our part, in so far as we separate ourselves from the Way, we build a world which disappoints and frustrates us" (219).

While Miller's main goal is to replace her respect and even obedience for Rorty's mastery and adaptation in our attitude toward nature, Rorty takes issue primarily with the idea of "nature" or "universe" or "world": "I have trouble thinking of the universe as a whole as characterizable in any way. . . . 'The universe' and 'the world' are terms for which I cannot find much use (except in contexts such as 'the world of the ancient Greeks' or 'the world in which Confucius lived')" (295), and he relates such ideas of nature, universe, and world to their religious sense in Dewey's *A Common Faith*, for which Rorty says that he has no use (296). So the idea of nature that Rorty is against is an idea of totality. It is not clear whether the nature to which Miller argues that we owe respect and even obedience is nature as such a totality or one as in "the world

of the ancient Greeks” or “the world in which Confucius lived.” If it is the latter, and there are indications that Miller does mean the latter, then it seems that Miller and Rorty do not disagree that much.

ATTITUDES TOWARD TRADITION

In his contribution to this volume, Roger Ames emphasizes similarities between Confucianism and pragmatism. While Rorty himself is quite sympathetic with Ames’s view in his response, the main part of his response is devoted to what seems to him the most significant difference between Confucianism and pragmatism: their attitudes toward tradition. Rorty argues that “Confucianism bears some responsibility for China’s pre-1912 unwillingness to break with tradition” (298). It is in this sense that, instead of looking for similarities between pragmatism and Confucianism as Ames does, Rorty emphasizes the distinction between the two as between the Romantic poet and the Confucian sage: “The former prides himself on bringing something new into the universe. The latter prides himself, just as does the Abrahamic theologian, on being in touch with something that has always been around” (299).

Rorty continues this contrast between Confucianism and pragmatism as a contrast between conservation and renovation in his reply to Marjorie Miller’s chapter. Miller emphasizes the importance of the Confucian idea of harmony, our “capacity to enhance and the activity of enhancing the harmonious interactions in which we participate, both individually and collectively” (216). Although Miller emphasizes that such a Confucian conception of harmony allows diversity and creativity, Rorty, in his response, argues against such a conception of harmony, saying that it will inhibit renovation. In Rorty’s view, without such specialists in dissonance as Blake, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein—

people who think that everything is getting too damned harmonious—intellectual and moral progress would slow to a halt. After an eruption of novelty, there will always be intellectuals of the second rank . . . who are good at bringing the new into harmony with the old. . . . [T]he smoother the cultural landscape, the more likely it is that some genius will be provoked into disrupting it. Harmony is thus as useful as chaos to this dialectical movement, but it is not its goal. The goal is increased richness of ways of writing and speaking—an increased range of possible forms of life. (295)

This contrast between Confucianism and pragmatism is also one of the two main themes of Kelly James Clark’s contribution to this volume. At the very beginning of his chapter, based on such *Analects* passages as 3.14, 7.1, and 7.5, Clark argues that Confucius identifies himself and his thought with the earliest period of the ancient Zhou tradition, and that Confucius and his thought have a decided antipathy toward innovation. Clark concludes that, “by all appearances, Confucius seems the prototypical conservative, conserving

and transmitting an ancient tradition in which is found the repository of righteousness and justice" (230). In Clark's view, this forms a stark contrast with Rorty's notion of self-creation, which "begins with a rejection of the traditional idea of a fixed or essential human nature. That is, Rorty begins with a radical sense of the sociohistorical contingency of the self" (229).

It is interesting to note that Rorty's contrast between Confucianism and pragmatism (including his own brand of pragmatism) in their attitude toward tradition is made in his reply to Ames, who argues against Whitehead's criticism of Confucius as having occasioned "a time when things ceased to change" (256). So, consistent with his previous work with David Hall, Ames, in his contribution to this volume, continues to picture Confucius as a pragmatist, existentialist, and so a Rortian, a picture Clark tries very hard to repudiate in his contribution. In the final analysis, the issue comes down to the question of how to interpret Confucius. Here, whatever differences exist between them, I think there is one thing in common between Confucius and Rorty: neither of them is a defender of the status quo; rather, they both try to transform it. Ironically enough, Confucius can be claimed to be more revolutionary than Rorty, given Rorty's preference for piecemeal reform over wholesale revolution.⁷ For example, Rorty argues against the cultural Left with "its preference for talking about 'the system' rather than about specific social practices and specific changes in those practices" and with a "revolutionary rather than reformist and pragmatic" rhetoric (Rorty 1998, 103).

The apparent difference between them is perhaps the way to break with the status quo: Confucius appeals to past tradition, and Rorty to future utopia. However, on the one hand, if we realize that the past tradition of the golden age that Confucius appeals to is not the tradition that continues to his time, but is rather a broken tradition, a tradition of a no less utopian age, then such a tradition is not much different from utopia.⁸ On the other hand, Rorty himself does not argue against our looking to the past for ideas of social change. In his view, the community in relation to which people renovate their society "may be the actual historical one in which they live, or another actual one, distant in time or place, or a quite imaginary one, consisting perhaps of a dozen heroes and heroines selected from history or fiction or both" (Rorty 1991, 21). Of course, on the question of what Confucius's ideal society is, one in which a more ideal society is allowed to be created (a Rortian option) or one in which everything is perfect and so nothing needs to be improved, it is most likely that Clark and Ames would provide different answers.

NOTES

1. Rorty does not mention that his own works are also rapidly being translated into Chinese. Among those already published are *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers (Volume 3)*;

Post-Philosophical Culture (a collection of essays later included in his first two volumes of philosophical papers published in English by Cambridge University Press, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* and *Essays on Heidegger and Others*); and *Post-Metaphysical Hope* (a collection of essays mostly from his volume in English, *Philosophy and Social Hope*). In addition, there are numerous translations of Rorty's individual essays published in various Chinese journals. Currently, Shanghai Translation Publishing House 上海譯文出版社 is working on *Rorty's Self-Selected Essays* 羅蒂自選集, a set of three volumes of Rorty's more recent essays, many of them not yet published in English.

2. References to other parts of this book are parenthetically indicated with page numbers in this chapter.

3. However, Rorty does not claim, as Hume does, that morality should therefore be based on feeling rather than reason and thus perpetuate the dichotomy. Instead, Rorty argues that the so-called reason is nothing but the ideally expanded feeling, and the so-called feeling is nothing but reason in a smaller scope (Rorty 1999, 77).

4. This similarity is also disclosed by Ni: "[N]either of them places the respect for reason and abstract moral principles as the motive for morality. Both of them take instead what is concrete and particular in our feelings, the feeling of compassion (Mencius) or pity for pain and remorse for cruelty (Rorty), and sensitivity to shame (Mencius) or humiliation (Rorty) as the motive for morality" (8). In my own contribution, I also discuss this similarity (75–79).

5. In my own contribution, I also discuss this important similarity (see 79–83). Tan, however, holds a different opinion: "Confucian focus on rituals indicates an understanding that transforming feelings and equipping one with certain kinds of 'know-how' is more important than gaining propositional knowledge of moral principles. However, they would consider Rorty's way of going about 'manipulating our feelings' by 'telling sad and sentimental stories' inadequate (Rorty 1998, 172, 185). The effect of such tales in making people treat others better, less cruelly, is limited compared to a more comprehensive approach of getting them to intermingle with those who need their concern and showing them through exemplary actions how to care for such people. Some kind of experience with suffering must provide the material for imagination to work with. Some guidance is needed on how to extend one's immediate experience into an empathetic understanding of others and how to alleviate their situations" (165).

6. I myself also adopt such a normative interpretation of the Confucian conception of human nature. In my view, "when Confucians talk about human nature, they are not trying to tell us what a human being originally or metaphysically is. They are rather trying to tell us not only what human beings should be but also that humans can be what they should be" (93).

7. Of course, for Rorty, an explanation of this difference between himself and Confucius is that the status quo in which he lives is a more just one than the status quo in which Confucius lived.

8. As a matter of fact, as Tu Weiming has pointed out on several occasions, at least one of the reasons why Confucius claims that his ideal society is the legendary ancient golden age is to show that his ideal is real: it is not merely a "utopia"; it is rather something that can be realized, as it was realized in the golden age.

REFERENCES

- Analects*. 1990. Trans. D. C. Lau. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Mencius*. 1970. Trans. D. C. Lau. London: Penguin Books.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1991. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1998. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 1998a. *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2001. "Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'." In *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Per Hanns Reill. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 2003. "Preface." In his *Post-Metaphysical Hope* 後形而上學希望. Shanghai 上海: Shanghai Yiwén Chubanshe 上海譯文出版社.
- . 2004. "Trapped between Kant and Dewey: The Current Situation of Moral Philosophy." In *New Essays on the History of Autonomy: A Collection Honoring J. B. Schneewind*, ed. Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2004a. "Philosophy-envy." *Daedalus* (Fall): 18–24.
- . 2006. *Taking Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*. Ed. and with an Introduction by Eduardo Mendieta. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zhongyong (*The Doctrine of Mean*). 1963. In *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. by Wing-tsit Chan. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

❧ PART I ❧

Relativity, Contingency,
and Moral Progress

This page intentionally left blank.

❧ 2 ❧

Rorty, Confucius, and Intercultural Relativism

KUANG-MING WU

This chapter advances a twofold daring proposal: (1) Relativism, properly redefined, describes how Rorty and Confucius—two thinkers who are nothing like the usual relativists—operate; (2) how both—the two unlikely companions—must interrelate. First we explain relativism. True relativism proclaims no definite view. Instead, it is thinking *élan*, never fixated in finality, ever resolutely open, adapting, and adjusting, to actual ideas, conversation, and history. Relativism is a life-pulsation of thinking. Then we explain how both Rorty's and Confucius's thinking fit this description of relativism, each in its distinctive way. We then elaborate on how their respective relativism-thrusts proceed—one formally, analytically, logically, and cumulatively, the other subtly, tacitly, perceptively, in storytelling way. Our telling, relating, of Rorty and Confucius shows how they should relate. They compose intercultural relativism.

WHAT RELATIVISM IS/DOES

It is quite misguided to think that taking relativism seriously sides with a "heresy." Relativism is really a vitality of relentless pursuit of insights as it relentlessly opens to every linkage. "Relativism" has two meanings. It can mean a noun, an assertion of a thesis, and it can mean a verb of continuous life-process. This realization generates seven stages of understanding of relativism.

1. We usually think of relativism as a categorical terminal judgment, an assertion that absolutely denies all absolutes. This way of taking relativism

makes it self-defeating: does it not assert its own denial? It is also irresponsible: does it not take all views as equally valid, depending on one's perspectives, cultural, ethical, or otherwise? Philosophers since Socrates (contra sophists) and Kant (contra Hume) are supposed to have fought and demolished relativism as we do heresies. Many questions are hurled at relativists: "Is there an absolute truth at all?" "Are all views equally valid?" "Is there a universal form of reasoning?" and "Can we judge between two views?"¹ They are insoluble conundrums that require acrobatic ingenuity to respond.² In short, relativism is cornered to death as soon as we take it as an asserted view. However, once we pronounce relativism dead wrong and dead, it keeps popping up in life, in thinking, and in history. No article "Relativism" exists, to my knowledge, yet philosophy indexes have "relation," "situationism," "skepticism," "subjectivism," "anarchism," all related to relativism (see for example Edwards and Wiener). All-pervasive yet nonexistent, relativism is a mystery if taken as a set view against absolutism, an asserted "ism" on a par with absolutism.

2. Such an impossible maze that stays for ages signals that relativism is a life-issue and that it is wrong to take relativism as a noun, as definitive a view as absolutism. Relativism must be an activity challenging an absolutist approach to life-issues. Challenging an assertive approach, relativism cannot itself be as assertive/definitive as absolutism but "reactive" to it.³ It is a verb, not a noun. So, how relativism does shows what it is. Relativism is open to actuality to sinuously describe it; relativism does not judge and categorically assert a view but realistically points, sifting, searching, ever on the go. It unceasingly tells stories of life, one after another, so that we can live through various views, situations, and attitudes, one after another, to learn/cultivate life.

3. Interestingly, in this context, "better" and "best" take on meanings that differ from mathematically exclusive ordinals. They are no longer such that if *A* is better than *B*, *B* cannot be as good as *A*, and if *A* is the best, nothing else can be as good as *A*. We can understand parents proudly proclaiming their children to be "the best in the world," loving spouses calling their beloved companions "the dearest in the world," and children seeing their mothers as "the most beautiful in the world." So we often use "better" and "best" for a happy situation, where "better" and "best" are *nonexclusive* descriptions of blessedness. Things in life can be this and that, each the "best" without excluding others. Logical nonexclusion is inadmissible, yet is the human warmth of relativism.

4. "But relativism cannot just blindly describe; it must propose *how* we should behave." Yes, it does. Ever alert/empathic/critical to events/views, relativism points to an appropriate life-posture. Relativism tells us that we are "never finished," "never too late," should "never say never," but are ever seeking, sifting, trailing the Dao of the self. No view is all hopelessly wrong, and we must carefully/patiently go through all views proposed,

comparing, weighing, and integrating them, never pompously pronouncing final judgment. Relativism is life-normative, turning antilife postures to pro-life pursuits.⁴

5. “But relativism must have a *goal*.” Yes, but its goal is not fixed in the Platonic heaven. Aristotle said “happiness” is our common goal but it differs as every life differs from every other and differs as it grows. My son Johnny vowed he would be a garbage collector in a big loud truck! Later, he vowed he was to be a milkman! He is now a violinist, historian of music, and medical technologist. No one is farther from being the usual relativist than Confucius. At fifteen, he launched a radically open quest called “learning (*xue* 學).” After attaining self-standing (*li* 立) (independence) at thirty, his life-horizons advanced to more and more solid concrete plateaus, one by one, in every decade. He turned not uncertain (*buhuo* 不惑) at forty, knew heavenly Decree (*tianming* 天命) at fifty, grew ear-congenial (*ershun* 耳順) (to things) at sixty, and finally followed the heart’s desire without stepping on regulations (*cong xin suo yu bu yu ju* 從心所欲不踰矩) at seventy (*Analects* 2.4),⁵ a few years before he died. Nothing is wrong with changing interests, shifting plateaus, and diversifying horizons as one grows and changes. Relativism is a pragmatic progress in which “all ends are endless.” As life’s goal varies, so relativism’s shifting goal is unpredictable and nonarbitrary-for-life—private or public, and private and public.⁶

6. “What is relativism’s reliable method?” Its method is careful discernment, going *through* each view from the inside, existentially (Wu 1965). This is the truth behind the “laughing stock” of “relativism indiscriminately tolerating all views as equally true”; the saying ciphers all-discrimination, being intolerant of intolerant finality, of closing off life-openness to anything. “All-tolerance” of relativism ciphers checking all views, sinuously *trailing* each specific daily emergence. Its method cannot be canonized any more than daily emergence can be legislated,⁷ and impossibility of canonization of methodology, far from being irresponsible arbitrariness, demonstrates an ever-alert discernment of all things that keep emerging.

7. “Does relativism ever argue at all?” Now, here is a bombshell on argumentation of relativism; it does not argue but describes actuality, and thereby *argues*. Witness Socrates; he argued powerfully when he described how he came to be indicted as an atheistic corrupter of youth. He described how, on the contrary, he improved their souls (no parents came forward to indict him) as he followed the Delphic Oracle in total disregard of his own living, and his own life (Hamilton, 20–24 et passim); his life-description demolished the indictment of “impiety.” Kierkegaard, Voltaire, and all literati, Western and Chinese—thinkers who keep making “thought experiments” with “examples” and “counterexamples” from life—keep story-describing, and *all* Chinese thinkers have been telling stories and histories. They all “argue.” “Story-argument” is persuasive because it ruthlessly follows life

itself, and this life-following describes what relativism performs. “But facts are not opinions/values, examples are not points, and so relativism mistakes description for demonstration.” This assertion commits false dichotomies in high judgment of abstract thinking. Thinking should be concrete. Far from being a contradiction, “concrete thinking” is the way of human life. Life forms history, an ongoing “story argument,” to which Confucius constantly appealed—so should the West.

G. E. Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy” says that we can still ask, “Why are they ‘good’?” to those naturalistic properties cited to compose things “good,” and so the definition of “good” with those properties is not of “good.” Well, do not those factual properties show how they actually compose “good,” and showing so demonstrates the “good” as good? Is this not what Socrates did when he demonstrated—proved and showed—the indictment to be unjustifiable simply by describing how in fact he came to be indicted? Showing proves.⁸

Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c.85-c.145 BCE) gave another extraordinary story of “story argument”; he defended the loyalty of his close friend, a general captured by the enemy (see Nienhauser 720–23). When the general finally capitulated, he was ordered to choose among suicide, execution, or castration. Too poor to bribe his way out, he chose castration, so as to “complete my deceased father’s History of China,” and then devoted twenty-eight long years to completing the monumental *Shi Ji* 史記 (*Records of History*) (Watson). It is unprecedented on three counts. One, it is the first comprehensive history of China; it shaped the mode of later Chinese historical writing. Two, it is a literary gem; it shaped the styles/techniques of later Chinese fiction and historical romance. Three, with its competent coverage and literary eloquence, it is the radical, valid, and thorough vindication of his life, the most devastating indictment of dynastic injustice.⁹ The lives of Socrates and Sima Qian thus dramatically relate how storytelling shows, and showing proves, for showing lets us see, and seeing is believing (see Black, 1–19 et passim).

Such a phenomenological description argues powerfully, as Rorty irresistibly did, “arguing by describing” the philosophy of the West, redescribing, redefining to make his own revolutionary points, to persuade hearers to change their mindsets. Story-style delivery of thinking is itself thinking, and dramatic storytelling is systematic argument. Relativism systematically describes, and describing demonstrates, that is, argues in showing things to be otherwise than usually thought to be, thereby changing the audience’s mind. Nothing is more powerful in argument than relativism’s relentless description of actuality.

In sum, relativism opposes absolutely asserting “the truth,”¹⁰ to relate to life in thinking, among friends, and through ideas. Opposing logical/analytical necessity,¹¹ relativism thinks in pragmatic coherence (Rorty) and story-description (Confucius). Opposing “mirroring representationalism” (Rorty 1979, 1991), relativism facilitates friendly conversations. Opposing fixation,