

The Threefold Manifestations and Path to Realizing the Confucian Ideal of “Unity of Humanity and Virtue”

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Abstract: The Confucian thought of unity of Humanity and virtue originates from the ontological cognition and belief of Heaven and man are united as one in virtue. Confucianism interpreted unity of Heaven and man through three interrelated aspects: the alignment of human nature with Mandate of Heaven in goodness, the correspondence between the Tao of Humanity and the Tao of Heaven in propriety, and the integration of human life with mandate of Heaven in Tao. On the practical level, the unity of Heaven and Humanity is embodied in the unity of human and virtue. As the theoretical core of China’s traditional ethical culture, the Confucian doctrine of unity of Humanity and virtue provides a profound foundation for ancient moral education and an enduring impetus for personal moral cultivation and self-discipline. Within the Confucian worldview, the pursuit of unity of virtue and Humanity is to realize the unity of Heaven and Humanity in the human realm; therefore, cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven and the pursuit of unity of Heaven and Humanity are manifested in reality as the pursuit of unity of Humanity and virtue.

1. Preface

The moral cognition and aspiration of “the unity of humans and virtue” provide inexhaustible motivation for Confucian moral self-cultivation and ethical practice. In Confucian thought, human beings receive “Heaven’s mandate” and therefore innately possess “sprouts of goodness” or an inherent “good nature.” If one internally “extends and fulfills” these moral potentials and externally follows ritual norms in the pursuit of “supreme goodness,” one can transform latent morality into actualized morality—namely, turn the potential unity of humans and virtue into its realized form. Although Confucianism did not explicitly articulate the concept of “the unity of humans and virtue” in historical texts, it consistently pursued the ideal of “aligning one’s virtue with that of Heaven and Earth.” In concrete terms, this alignment is manifested precisely as the unity of humans and virtue. Therefore, in effect, Confucianism has always regarded this unity both as an innate presupposition and as a goal to be attained through later effort.

2. The Three-Dimensional Manifestations of the Confucian Concept of the “Unity of Humans and Virtue”

The Confucian concept of the “unity of humans and virtue” is grounded in the ontological understanding and belief that “Heaven and humanity form a unity” with respect to virtue. Confucianism has always contemplated the cosmos and human existence from the perspective of the integrated relationship among Heaven, Earth, and humanity, holding that “the realms of Heaven and humanity merge into one” (*Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*). Moreover, it maintains that this unity of Heaven and humanity is realized through virtue, a view concretely expressed through three interrelated dimensions.

2.1 The Unity of Human Nature and Heaven’s Mandate in Goodness

In Confucian thought, the unity of Heaven and humanity is first manifested in the unity of human nature and Heaven’s mandate, a unity grounded in the belief that human nature originates from Heaven. In traditional Chinese culture, the idea that human nature has its source in Heaven emerged quite early. *Book of Poetry*, “The Multitude” records: “Heaven gives birth to the multitudes; all things have their norms. The people hold to their constant dispositions and delight in virtuous conduct.” This line shows that by the Western Zhou period; people already possessed a nascent awareness that human nature derives from Heaven. Confucius, who “trusted in and loved the ancient Taos,” inherited and further developed this earlier Heaven–humanity worldview. He declared that “Heaven has endowed me with virtue” (*The Analects*), holding that his moral qualities were bestowed by Heaven; he also stated that human beings are “similar in their nature”. Later, Zisi proposed that “What Heaven commands is called human nature” (*Book of Rites*, “Doctrine of the Mean”). What is “Heaven’s mandate”? “The mandate is Heaven’s decree” (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*). “Heaven’s mandate” refers both to what Heaven prescribes for humans and to the mission Heaven entrusts to them. Thus, the statement “What Heaven commands is called human nature” means that a person’s mandate is endowed by Heaven, and this mandate manifests within humans as human nature. This formulation links human nature with Heaven’s mandate. Subsequently, *the Guodian Chu Slips*, in *Nature Arises from Mandate*, further explains from a developmental perspective: “Nature issues from mandate, and mandate descends from Heaven,” clearly articulating the generative and mutually constitutive relationship among Heaven, mandate, and human nature.

If the phrase “Heaven’s mandate is called Nature” articulates the generative relationship between Heaven’s mandate and human nature, then the expression “inherits goodness and completes one’s nature” illuminates their identity in moral quality. As stated in *The Book of Changes*, “Commentary on the Appended Phrases, Part II”: “The alternation of yin and yang constitutes the Tao. What continues it is goodness, and what completes it is human nature”. The alternation of yin and yang represents the creative movement of Heaven’s Tao. Humanity, inheriting this cosmic moral principle, possesses an inherent goodness that mirrors the moral order of Heaven. From an ontological standpoint, “inheriting goodness and completing one’s nature” explains the fundamental reason for the goodness of human nature—that human goodness originates from the goodness inherent in the Tao of Heaven; and that the moral quality of human nature is a concrete manifestation of the moral goodness of Heaven.

The unity of human nature and Heaven’s mandate in goodness indicates that morality is innately embedded within human beings in the form of potentiality. In other words, humans possess an inherent capacity and possibility to become unified with virtue. This claim not only demonstrates, from the standpoint of a theory of human nature, the feasibility of achieving the “unity of humans and virtue,” thereby providing a solid anthropological foundation for the moral effort to realize such unity in practice; it also affirms that human beings are “the most precious under Heaven,” thus

encouraging individuals to pursue continually the realization of this unity between humans and virtue.

2.2 Unity of the Tao of Humanity and the Tao of Heaven in Propriety

The unity of the “human Tao” and the “Heavenly Tao” in ritual constitutes the concrete manifestation of the unity of Heaven and humanity in virtue. If the unity of human nature and Heaven’s mandate in goodness represents the internal unity between humans and Heaven, then the unity of the human Tao and the Heavenly Tao in propriety represents their external unity. This indicates that humans are aligned with Heaven not only in terms of the qualitative constitution of their nature, but also in the modes of their activity and the trajectory of their lives.

Human inheritance of the Heavenly Tao is reflected in both internal and external dimensions: internally, by receiving Heaven’s mandate as an innate disposition toward goodness; externally, by taking the Heavenly Tao as the human Tao. The idea of “continuing and completing goodness as one’s nature” has already been discussed above. To say that humans take the Heavenly Tao as the human Tao means that the human Tao is originally the Heavenly Tao, and that the two are in essence one and the same. The *Guodian Chu Slips*, in Yucang I, clarifies this point: “The Changes is that by which the Heavenly Tao and the human Tao are brought into harmony,” implying that these two Taos are mutually accessible and mutually aligned. As Wang Fuzhi later remarked, “The Tao is one: in Heaven it is called the Heavenly Tao; in humans it is called the human Tao” (*Zhangzi Zhengmeng*). Thus, the Heavenly Tao and the human Tao are ultimately the same Tao, with the human Tao being the manifestation of the Heavenly Tao within the human world.

Confucianism holds that propriety is the shared manifestation of both the Heavenly Tao and the human Tao. As stated in the *Book of Rites*, “Yueji”: “Heaven is honored and Earth is lowly, and thus the roles of ruler and minister are fixed. High and low are thereby distinguished, and the positions of noble and base established. In Heaven they become images; on Earth they take form. In this Tao, propriety constitutes the distinctions between Heaven and Earth.” Propriety is thus formulated on the basis of the manifestations of the Heavenly Tao—the “Heavenly images” and “Earthly forms.” Zhang Zai further clarified: “Heaven, in generating things, naturally exhibits signs of honor and humility, greatness and smallness; humans merely follow these signs, and this is what comes to be called propriety” (*Jingxueli ku*). This explicitly indicates that propriety is instituted by humans in accordance with, and in compliance with, the Heavenly Tao.

This view of the unity of the human Tao and the Heavenly Tao in propriety simultaneously elevates ritual to Heaven, thereby endowing it with sacredness, and imbues it with the moral content of the Heavenly Tao, giving propriety its inherent goodness. In this Tao, propriety is not only the structural principle of Heaven and Earth but also the normative standard for human society. Through propriety, humans can integrate themselves into the vast processes of the cosmos, coexist with Heaven, Earth, and spirits, resonate with the rhythms and patterns of the universe, and thereby discern life’s direction and establish its values. Accordingly, the “unity of humans and virtue” is realized in practice through the performance of ritual.

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2.3 Unity of Human Life and Heaven's Mandate in the Tao

The Tao in which human life is unified with Heaven's mandate refers to the Tao of being human, that is, the human Tao. The human Tao is identical with the Heavenly Tao, and the Heavenly Tao is in turn the manifestation of Heaven's mandate. The unity of human life and Heaven's mandate in the Tao thus means that human life should unfold and proceed in accordance with the Heavenly Tao, which embodies Heaven's mandate. This unity of human life and Heaven's mandate constitutes the practical culmination of the "threefold discourse" on the unity of Heaven and humanity.

If the unity of human nature and Heaven's mandate in goodness illustrates the possibility of achieving the "unity of humans and virtue" from the perspective of internal human potential, and the unity of the Heavenly Tao and the human Tao in ritual demonstrates the necessity of realizing this unity from the standpoint of external normative guidance, then the unity of human life and Heaven's mandate in the Tao represents its actualization. Necessity and possibility alone do not equal actuality; only when human life is genuinely conducted according to the human Tao, embodying the Heavenly Tao and fulfilling Heaven's mandate, can the "unity of humans and virtue" be truly realized.

If the unity of Heaven and humanity in human nature and Heaven's mandate in goodness, and in the alignment of the human Tao with the Heavenly Tao in ritual, constitutes moral cognition of the unity of Heaven and humanity, then the unity of human life and Heaven's mandate in the Tao constitutes the real pursuit and practice of this unity in virtue. However, in actual life, some individuals fail to recognize Heaven's mandate, do not respect it, and casually violate human moral principles, thereby falling into "non-mandate". To attain "correct mandate" (*Mencius*), one must recognize both the necessity and possibility of the "unity of humans and virtue" and, in concrete life, follow Heaven's mandate, practice the Tao, cultivate virtue, and pursue unity with virtue.

The unity of human life and Heaven's mandate in the Tao also represents the ultimate aim of the Confucian doctrine of the unity of Heaven and humanity: to guide people to live in accordance with virtue. A morally guided life is one in which human existence unfolds in accordance with Heaven's mandate and the order of the Heavenly Tao. The significance of this unity lies in prompting individuals to recognize the limits imposed by Heaven and the mission they have received from Heaven, thereby enabling them to faithfully observe Heaven's mandate and practice the Heavenly Tao—the purpose of the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and humanity.

Confucianism holds that, at the practical level, the unity of Heaven and humanity is realized as the "unity of humans and virtue." Accordingly, recognition of the unity of Heaven and humanity equates to recognition of the unity of humans and virtue, and the pursuit of the unity of Heaven and humanity is manifested in the pursuit of the unity of humans and virtue.

3. The Status and Function of the Confucian Concept of the "Unity of Humans and Virtue" in Traditional Ethical Culture

The Confucian concept of the "unity of humans and virtue" occupies a central and foundational position in traditional Chinese ethical culture. It serves as the anthropological basis for moral education in ancient times and functions as an intrinsic source of motivation for individuals to consciously and voluntarily cultivate and practice virtue.

3.1 The Core and Ethical Aspirations of Traditional Chinese Ethical Culture

Chinese culture is an ethical-oriented culture, in which ethical morality occupies a central position and plays a decisive role in social life. How did China come to develop an ethical-oriented culture, and what is its theoretical foundation?

"Culture is nothing other than the pattern of human life." ^[2] This definition by Liang Shuming

highlights that culture is a uniquely human mode of life, and that culture emerges when humans organize and conduct their lives according to their own designs. But why do different nations and ethnic groups develop distinct cultural forms? Liang argued that culture is merely the “occasional fancy” of genius, and that its emergence depends solely on objective “conditions” rather than subjective “causes.”^[2] Because people and their circumstances differ, naturally different cultures arise.

While Liang’s definition of culture is precise, his explanation of its formation is problematic. The emergence of a culture cannot be merely an incidental fancy of genius; even such fancies are inevitably constrained by the genius’s own subjective and objective conditions. Mou Zhongshan critiqued this view, arguing that emphasizing only external conditions is insufficient; the role of human agency must also be acknowledged in the process of cultural formation. Mou Zongsan termed this context of constraints the transcendental aperture, and held that because the initial “aperture” of each culture differs, the resulting culture and philosophy also differ. The specific choice of aperture is determined by historical necessity.^[3] Regarding Chinese culture, Mou Zongsan argued that from its inception it has focused on human life, and therefore places a particular emphasis on morality.^[3]

Mou Zhongshan rightly observed that the emergence of culture is influenced by both internal and external, subjective and objective factors; however, he did not clearly specify what these factors are. Why did the inception of Chinese culture focus on human life? This paper argues that uniquely Chinese conceptions of the cosmos and human existence constitute the key factor shaping the formation of China’s ethical-oriented culture.

Human survival and Tao of life are shaped not only by environmental constraints but also by the guidance of one’s conceptions. Living in the world, humans reflect on fundamental questions such as the relationship between themselves and Heaven, Earth, and all living things, depending on the conditions in which they exist. Different answers to these questions determine varying attitudes toward life; different life attitudes shape different modes of living, and consequently give rise to distinct cultures.

From its inception, Chinese culture has interpreted the cosmos and human existence from the perspective of the “relationship between Heaven and humanity,” holding that “Heaven and humanity are one” (Zhang Zai). Heaven embodies the benevolent virtue of shengsheng, or continuous vitality, and humans, by “inheriting Heaven,” possess innate benevolence, and by “emulating Heaven,” achieve moral virtue. This moral virtue is both the fundamental quality that distinguishes humans from animals and the connecting point of the unity of Heaven and humanity, the place where humans “align their virtue with that of Heaven and Earth” (*The commentary on the “Book of Changes”*). Accordingly, the Chinese have historically placed great emphasis on morality and ritual, giving rise to an ethical-oriented culture.

The “unity of humans and virtue” constitutes the core and ethical aspiration of traditional ethical-oriented culture. Since morality is the fundamental quality that defines human beings, individuals should strive to cultivate virtue and become moral persons. At the personal level, one should practice benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity; within the family, a father should be compassionate, a son filial, an elder brother friendly, a younger brother respectful, and spouses should treat each other with mutual respect and courtesy; in society, one should “love all equally” (*Analects*), and ensure that the widowed, orphaned, lonely, and sick are all cared for (*Book of Rites*); at the state level, one should pursue peace under Heaven and ensure the well-being of the nation and its people. In short, the entirety of social life is structured by ethics and enriched by morality, forming the practical dimension of an ethical-oriented culture.

Living a moral life is not only the practical goal of Confucian life but also its ultimate meaning and pursuit. To live morally is to realize the internal and external unity of humans and virtue, that is, to achieve the “unity of humans and virtue.” This constitutes the deepest and most significant value

and meaning of the doctrine of the “unity of humans and virtue.”

3.2 The Anthropological Basis of Moral Education in Ancient Times

Social moral education directly influences, and can even determine, the emergence of individual moral consciousness and the effectiveness of moral agency. The efficacy of social moral education largely depends on the solidity of its theoretical foundation. The Confucian doctrine of the “unity of humans and virtue” provides a robust anthropological basis for moral education in ancient China. According to this doctrine, humans inherit Heaven and possess innate goodness, with the potential to cultivate virtue; however, this innate goodness requires external guidance and reinforcement. Theoretically, this affirms both the possibility and the necessity of moral education.

The doctrine of the “unity of humans and virtue” also provides a theoretical basis for the practical implementation of moral education. Moral education, as described, is to “gradually cultivate the people with benevolence, shape them with righteousness, and regulate them with ritual” (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*). That is, through the practice of benevolent and righteous deeds, people are enlightened and influenced, allowing their innate moral sprouts and benevolent nature to expand and develop; through the guidance of ritual, their behavior and conduct are brought into alignment with the Tao of being human. In this Tao, humans can transform from possessing the latent potential of the “unity of humans and virtue” into realizing it in practice.

In the process of moral education, propriety plays a particularly important role. “Morality, benevolence, and righteousness cannot be realized without propriety; instruction and the correction of social customs cannot be accomplished without propriety” (*Book of Rites*). Confucians attach such importance to propriety because they regard it as the external realization of humans’ innate goodness and as the manifestation of both the Heavenly Tao and the human Tao. To consciously observe propriety is thus to practice benevolence and cultivate virtue. When Yan Yuan asked about benevolence, Confucius replied, “To restrain oneself and return to propriety is benevolence” (*Analects*). Self-restraint and conducting all actions according to propriety constitutes benevolence.

3.3 The Intrinsic Motivational Source for Individuals to Consciously and Voluntarily Cultivate and Practice Virtue

Then why do Confucians not speak directly of moral cultivation or moral practice? The hope that people will actively practice morality has been a universal moral ideal across centuries and cultures. However, the dualistic tension between morality and human freedom—where morality constrains and is constrained by human will—makes naturally freedom-loving individuals generally reluctant to voluntarily accept moral obligations. Moreover, morality itself lacks sufficient force to compel humans to act morally. Consequently, the question of how to ensure that people accept and practice morality has been a perennial challenge.

Globally, attempts to address this challenge often rely on external authoritative forces: Christianity appeals to God, Islam to Allah, and Buddhism encourages the pursuit of Buddhahood. In these cases, morality is endowed with absolute power through a divine being, compelling humans to obey moral precepts. Yet for individuals, such externally imposed morality resembles a “Leviathan”—a heavy spiritual burden. While one may comply, the heart is unwilling, and the mind resents it. Inevitably, people may seek to evade, reject, or even attack morality. The modern experience of Christian morality in the West vividly illustrates this point. This demonstrates clearly that moral adherence cannot rely solely on external authority; genuine moral practice must be driven by intrinsic human motivation.

So how can people be motivated to actively practice morality? Confucianism adopts a method that is both similar to and distinct from religious approaches. First, similar to religious morality,

Confucianism grounds morality in “Heaven” as its ontological basis, providing a metaphysical support for moral authority. Morality cannot rely solely on external authority, but it cannot do without it either. In Chinese culture, the authority of morality derived solely from “Heaven” is insufficient—not only because morality cannot depend entirely on external force, but also because in Chinese thought, “Heaven” is grounded in material and natural phenomena. Although it possesses a form of sacred authority, without a corresponding human power to support it, its influence is greatly weakened.

Second, Confucianism takes a different path from the binary logic of the “human–virtue” dichotomy in religious morality. By using Heaven, Heaven’s mandate, or the Heavenly Tao as intermediaries, it demonstrates the unity of humans and morality through three dimensions: the unity of human nature and Heaven’s mandate in goodness, the unity of the human Tao and the Heavenly Tao in ritual, and the unity of human life and Heaven’s mandate in the Tao. This tripartite framework establishes the integrated relationship between humans and morality—that is, the “unity of humans and virtue”—thereby affirming the moral agency and subjectivity of human beings.

The establishment of humans’ moral subjectivity contributes to self-affirmation and the voluntary cultivation and practice of virtue. When morality is understood as inherent in humans, and humans share virtue with Heaven and Earth, it affirms the innate unity between humans and morality, grounded in human nature. This fully embodies the principle that “of all things under Heaven, human nature is most precious” (*Xiaojing*), strongly stimulating self-respect and self-affirmation, which in turn motivates individuals to cultivate and practice virtue and strive to realize the “unity of humans and virtue.” Conversely, if morality is viewed solely as an external constraint or coercion imposed on humans, as in religious morality, people are unlikely to voluntarily accept and practice it. Such externally imposed morality depends entirely on external forces—either the mystical power of religion or the coercive power of secular authority. The effectiveness of this approach has already been discussed above and need not be repeated here.

4. Cultivating Virtue in Accord with Heaven: The Path to Achieving the Unity of Humanity and Virtue

According to the Confucian moral framework, “cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven” constitutes the path to realizing the “unity of humans and virtue.” To “cultivate virtue in accord with Heaven” means to actively and voluntarily engage in moral cultivation and moral practice with the aim of aligning oneself with Heaven or Heaven’s mandate. In essence, it is the pursuit of the realized “unity of humans and virtue” as a means to achieve the unity of Heaven and humanity. The reason humans actively and voluntarily “cultivate virtue in accord with Heaven” and strive for the “unity of humans and virtue” stems primarily from two forms of cognition: transcendent and practical.

4.1 The Transcendent Dimension

The transcendent dimension can be further divided into positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, “cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven” aspires to “participate with Heaven and Earth”. Confucians hold that humans, endowed with Heaven’s mandate, possess a nature that is more precious than all other beings, and therefore have the potential to unite their virtue with that of Heaven and Earth. While this affirms the possibility of such unity from the perspective of human nature, it remains only a potential quality rather than a reality. In practice, humans differ in temperament, and the benevolent virtue they inherit from Heaven varies; they are not naturally aligned with Heaven in goodness or virtue. Only by sincerely cultivating virtue, fully manifesting their innate goodness, following Heaven’s mandate, practicing the human Tao, and fulfilling their Heaven-bestowed mission can humans achieve harmony in goodness and virtue with Heaven.

As the *Doctrine of the Mean* states: “Only the utmost sincerity under Heaven can fully develop

one's nature. If one can fully develop one's nature, one can fully develop human nature. If one can fully develop human nature, one can fully develop the nature of things. If one can fully develop the nature of things, one can assist in the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth. If one can assist in the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth, one can participate with Heaven and Earth." The notion of "participating with Heaven and Earth" underscores that "humans are the most precious under Heaven" (*Xunzi*), but its prerequisite is the unification of human and Heaven's virtue. In other words, humans can achieve "participation with Heaven and Earth" through the cultivation of virtue, thereby realizing the "unity of humans and virtue."

On the negative side, cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven is motivated by "fear of Heaven's mandate" (*Analects*). The practice of "cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven" was initially proposed out of fear of divine retribution. The dramatic political and social upheavals during the Yin and Zhou periods made the Zhou people acutely aware that "Heaven's mandate is not constant" (*Book of Poetry*), and that Heaven's mandate could shift depending on the presence or absence of human virtue. As the *Book of Documents* notes, "Heaven shows no partiality; it supports only virtue". Consequently, the Duke of Zhou admonished the descendants of the Ji clan: "Do not forget your ancestors; diligently cultivate your virtue. Forever align with the mandate, and seek abundant blessings for yourself" (*Book of Poetry*). In other words, one must cultivate virtue in accordance with Heaven's mandate to preserve political authority and secure personal and collective well-being.

Thus, Confucians both revere and fear Heaven's mandate. Reverence for Heaven's mandate aims at "seeking abundant blessings," while fear of Heaven's mandate stems from apprehension of divine retribution, and this fear remains ever-present in the mind. In response to the question, "Is 'fear of Heaven's mandate' a general principle?" Zhu Xi replied: "Indeed it is. If one does not fear this principle, one will be unable to properly handle subordinate matters" (*Zhuzi Yulei*). Out of fear of divine punishment, those who understand Heaven's mandate will naturally strive to cultivate virtue in order to align with it. Thus, cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven both prevents divine retribution and brings blessings, making it a pursuit that those who recognize Heaven's mandate are naturally motivated to undertake.

4.2 The Practical Dimension

At the practical level, cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven in pursuit of the "unity of humans and virtue" enables one to "regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world," thereby motivating ambitious individuals to continually cultivate virtue and strive for moral excellence. Morality is actualized internally and manifested externally. Internally, it is realized by cultivating virtue within the heart to form moral character, achieving the true unity of innate human nature and Heaven's mandate—this is the work of "inner sagehood". Externally, it is realized when internal virtue is expressed as moral conduct, achieving the true unity of human life with Heaven's mandate—this is the work of "outer kingship". In this Tao, the highest moral ideal of "inner sagehood and outer kingship" is attained.

When Zilu asked Confucius what constitutes a gentleman, Confucius replied successively: "Cultivate oneself with reverence," "cultivate oneself to bring peace to others," and "cultivate oneself to bring peace to the people" (*Analects*). These three responses reveal two interrelated yet distinct Confucian life goals: "cultivating oneself with reverence" pursues inner sagehood, that is, the self-perfection of virtue; while "cultivating oneself to bring peace to others" and "to the people" pursues outer kingship, that is, the ideal of benefiting society and ensuring the welfare of the people. In other words, through virtue cultivation, one can achieve personal and familial moral integrity and stability, and on a larger scale, contribute to the welfare of the state and the world. This provides the clearest exposition of the Confucian principle of "cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven" in pursuit of the

“unity of humans and virtue” and represents the core purpose of Confucian moral theory.

“Cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven” emphasizes both the nobility of humans aligned with Heaven and the supreme status of human action in accordance with Heaven’s mandate and the Heavenly Tao, while simultaneously delineating the boundaries of human conduct. The unity of the human Tao and the Heavenly Tao implies that humans must act according to the human Tao derived from the Heavenly Tao and must not contravene it. Humans are obliged to follow Heaven’s mandate and the human Tao and must not act arbitrarily. Otherwise, if virtue is neglected or violated, one will “bring disaster upon oneself and cannot escape it” (*Book of Documents*). This framework avoids fatalism while underscoring the necessity and absoluteness of moral practice, thereby motivating individuals to actively cultivate and enact virtue.

“Cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven” also highlights human moral subjectivity. This is precisely why Mou Zongsan emphasized the importance of “subjectivity” and “innate morality” in Chinese philosophy. ^[4] The Confucian theory that underscores human moral agency is far superior to Western moral frameworks, which either place humans subserviently under God, thereby negating human subjectivity, or indulge natural human desires without moral self-restraint. Morality is inherent in humans, and through the cultivation of virtue, individuals can influence Heaven’s mandate and align themselves with Heaven. This demonstrates that humans are not entirely passive before Heaven’s mandate, resigned to fate, but can, through fulfilling their responsibilities, achieve “participation with Heaven and Earth.” Cultivating virtue can move Heaven, affect the Earth, and enable “participation with Heaven and Earth,” providing an inexhaustible motivation for humans to actively engage in moral cultivation and practice. Precisely because humans can, through the cultivation of virtue, influence Heaven’s mandate and benefit the world—and because only through virtue cultivation can this be achieved—“cultivating virtue in accord with Heaven” has remained the moral aspiration of the Chinese people for centuries.

5. Conclusion

The Confucian concept of the “unity of humans and virtue” offers significant insights for the construction of contemporary moral theory in China. A sound moral theory should facilitate individual moral identification, moral cultivation, and voluntary moral practice. It must be acknowledged that current moral theory in China, particularly foundational moral theory, faces challenges that hinder individual moral identification, moral cultivation, and moral practice. For instance, morality is sometimes studied in isolation from real life, treated as an independent “entity”; in considering the relationship between morality and humans, the two are often regarded as separate, forming a binary opposition of constraint and being constrained, limitation and being limited. While such a moral theory may effectively address questions such as “What is morality?”, it is less conducive to individuals’ recognition, acceptance, and choice of moral values, and even less supportive of moral cultivation and practice.

Morality, as a set of values guiding human words and actions, cannot be effective unless it becomes an internalized self-belief; otherwise, it exists at most as knowledge in the human mind. Only when moral theory appropriately addresses fundamental questions concerning morality itself and the relationship between morality and humans can it support the edifice of moral civilization, enhance social moral culture, and promote individual moral cultivation and practice. In this regard, the Confucian concept of the “unity of humans and virtue,” as a key resource of traditional Chinese moral culture, provides important guidance and inspiration.

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