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VALUE AND SELFHOOD: PRAGMATISM, CONFUCIANISM, AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Abstract

This paper articulates a dialogue between Edward Casey, Cheng Chung-ying and me that began at the Eastern Division annual meeting in Philadelphia of the American Philosophical Association, in a session sponsored by the International Society for Chinese Philosophy. There we read brief versions of the papers presented in this issue and commented on one another. Casey represented Continental phenomenology, Cheng the Chinese tradition as he has developed in into onto-generativel hermeneutics, and I the melding of American pragmatic and Confucian traditions that I have been developing. This paper begins by contrasting the experiential frames within which pragmatism and Continental phenomenology work, elaborating in some detail the pragmatic theory of interpretive interaction. This is contrasted with the orientation to consciousness generally held by Continental philosophers. The paper argues that pragmatism and Confucianism are close on many aspects of this contrast, and especially on their common views that values are encountered in the world through experience and that the experiencing self is a product, not a condition, of experience. The paper then develops a comparative pragmatic-Confucian theory of the self, emphasizing the roles of pragmatic semiotics and

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Confucian ritual theory, the individuating role of ritual playing, the context of human development and interaction in matrices of rituals, the importance of sincerity in ritual playing, and the tragedy of human failure to have rituals in which the achievement of sincerity is almost miraculous. Cheng and Casey are engaged throughout as friends, an appropriate ritual context for philosophical dialogue.

## I. Experiential Frames: Pragmatism and Phenomenology

The American pragmatic tradition that I espouse and work to extend regards human experience as interactions of persons with their environments.<sup>1</sup> This is a fundamentally different frame for experience from the transcendental frame common in most forms of European phenomenology, as will become clear in what follows. It can rather neatly be mapped onto many themes in Confucian approaches to experience, as Roger Ames and David Hall have argued.<sup>2</sup> Experiential interactions are interpretive in the sense that they employ signs to grasp the environmental elements in certain respects.<sup>3</sup> Hence the interpretations are always triadic, taking the signs to represent the objects interpreted in the respects as interpreted by the interpreter. As Charles S. Peirce said, the basic form of interpretation is that the interpretation takes the object to be as represented by the sign in a certain respect, for instance, as in interpreting a barn to be red in respect of color.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of the respect in which to interpret the environment is always a function of valuation, taking that respect to be the relevantly important one.<sup>5</sup> The valuation might be significantly biological, as in the quick flight that interprets a rustling in the bush with the sign of

danger: the interpretive flight precedes analysis of the sound or even consciousness of the potentially dangerous situation. Such biological valuations have evolutionary adaptive value: persons who flee first and inquire second stand a better chance of living to pass on their timorous genes than those who look first to see whether the noise was made by a tiger and don't live to pass on any genes.

Most human experience is guided also by values built in to the culture and made into habits of daily life, indicating what is important to notice and respond to in typical environments, shaping the quotidian day. These include interactions that are more responsive as well as those that are more active and directed. Some of these come to consciousness but most do not unless the interactions are misguided by the habitual signs. For instance, we usually do not notice the furniture when walking through a familiar room unless something is out of place and we bump it.

Much of human experience is guided by values that involve explicit purposes that are more or less conscious. Sometimes we greet friends not only out of habit but with sincere interest; sometimes we purposely seek for a strategy to act in order to deal with a difficult person or situation. Sometimes we sit down to write papers and organize our hours around intellectual inquiry. Sometimes we move vigorously in order to get exercise. Most of the time, we are making many interpretations all at once, with shifting phases of conscious attention. A short time ago on my morning walk I was reflecting with good, nostalgic feelings about being on this panel with my old friends, Ed and Chungying (I also was thinking about Linyu but she is not old!); these reflections were interspersed with wonderings about what I should say, and what they were likely to say, a kind of easy musement that shifted among the intellectual and personal elements.<sup>6</sup> Then I got to the big hill and suddenly became aware of my heavy breathing and concentrated on raising my heart rate. Until then, the interpretive habits of my walking

engagements of the environment were pretty much unnoticed. All through the walk I was taking appreciative stock of the beautiful neighborhood near my home, admiring the trees and many of the houses, and nodding to an occasional neighbor. Simultaneously, then, I was interpreting the aesthetic qualities of my neighborhood, walking for the sake of exercise, attending to my body's needs and habits, thinking about philosophical issues, reflecting on the different paths my friends and I have taken, and delighting in the memories of friendship.

Different values, and values of different sorts, guide the multiplicity of congruent interactions involved in my walk. Among the most important are those that parse the "environment" into foreground and background elements. The foreground elements are the objects of an interpretive engagement, but objects always as set within backgrounds. Each of the interpretive interactions on my walk identifies my environment differently regarding foreground and background. Sometimes the foreground is where I'm stepping. Sometimes it is memories of Ed's adroit knowledge of Whitehead, someone Continental philosopher should be ashamed to have, sometimes it's Chung-ying's impassioned insistence that I could be a Confucian despite my ethnic distance. Moreover, the configurations of foreground and background are constantly changing. Sometimes the changes are caused by arising attractions and repulsions. Often, however, they are caused by interruptions, something the pragmatist Charles Peirce called Secondness, a kind of brute opposition that interrupts the continuous operations of habits, and that will be described below. Conscious attention is highly sensitive to interruptions.

On this pragmatic model of experience as multileveled and dynamic interpretive interactions and engagements, it is plain that value is involved in the environments as well as in the interpreters. On the side of the interpreter, value is involved in the selection of respects of interpretation. At the same time these personal valuations are good or bad insofar as they

recognize what is important in the environment. The real value resides in the environment in correlation with what human beings can apprehend and respond to. A tiger in the rustling bush is really bad for the slow-to-flee interpreters and their potential progeny. An environmental disaster would make my walk through town horrific. The structure of the environment is what contains the values we more or less relevantly learn to recognize, and our experience is shaped by signs that are more or less in accordance with the “affordances” of the environment to fit our valuing habits. “Affordances,” a term introduced into psychological thinking by J. J. Gibson, means the ways by which environments are structured in complex way that afford being interpreted with the resources and interests of an interpreter’s semiotic system. The walker in the jungle interprets the whole situation of noise in the bush at once. The value in the interpreter’s intentional sign-filled interpretation is matched more or less by the structure of the environment. People, of course, want to develop value-laden interpretive structures that pick up on what is important in the environment.<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Barrett is developing pragmatic models for cognitive science employing the notion of affordances, although the point would have been recognized by Peirce and the other pragmatists.<sup>8</sup>

This pragmatic valuational experiential model is different from the dominant model of phenomenology in Continental philosophy, from which both Cheng and Casey pick their major cues. Broadly speaking, the Continental tradition follows Kant in supposing that experience is what is in consciousness and its subconscious layers and that this makes possible the project of describing consciousness. Phenomenology is description of experience for this tradition, description deep and multilayered. No one has explored the subtleties of consciousness in a descriptive mode more than Ed, and Chungying is looming large with a descriptive ontology from the Yijing!<sup>9</sup>

My pragmatic trajectory says that experience is not especially a matter of consciousness but rather of interpretive interaction. Peirce argued, conclusively to my mind, that there is no such thing as intuitive consciousness but rather that what we think we see and hear in consciousness is a matter of inference when you come down to it. He showed that our sense of the seemingly continuous visual field fills in inferentially all the spots that don't register where the optic nerves enter the eyes and no rods and cones can pick up anything.<sup>10</sup> Nothing is simply given, only selectively taken in a complex environment of multilayered interpretations with a lot of corrective interruptions or Secondness thrown in.

Because consciousness is a vagrant and often ephemeral aspect of experience, pragmatic phenomenology cannot be something controlled by ideals of description. Hegelian phenomenology described the appearances of the rational advance of consciousness through the dialectic of Spirit (*Geist*). Value or importance, for Hegel, is defined by the place in the dialectic. Husserlian phenomenology bracketed claims to say what is real and important in order to describe accurately the forms of consciousness. If things appear in consciousness as carrying one value or another, this is just a matter of their form and indicates nothing about what is really important. Later phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognized the limitation of the consciousness model and worked hard to articulate experience through the body.<sup>11</sup> Two students of Professor Casey and me have developed this even further. Drew Leder's *The Absent Body* is an important defense of body-thinking in critical dialogue with the Cartesian tradition.<sup>12</sup> David Strong's *Crazy Mountains: Learning from Wilderness to Weigh Technology* develops a bodily sense of perception of value that goes so far as to engage mountains in climbing.<sup>13</sup> The point about perceptual experience through the body place these phenomenologists close to William James. But whereas James held to a metaphysical "neutral monism" according to which

the neutral experience stuff can be organized either according to subjective selves or according to logical structures in the environment, with the result that the self is just as much a contingent construct as a mountain viewed from many angles, Merleau-Ponty, Leder, and Strong treat the body as a medium for a self to engage objects of appreciative perception. Heidegger was aware of transcendental philosophy's hidden commitment to construing the world as a function of the self's synthesizing activities, and struggled in contrast to define phenomenology as the world "coming across the open" to us (Daseins). But he never escaped the priority of Dasein as the subjective condition for experience.<sup>14</sup>

The pragmatic model of valuationally ordered interpretive and interactive engagement is radically different. The self and its first-person perspective is just as much a *product* of ongoing interpretive interactions as any representation of the world engaged, not the apriori or transcendental condition for the interpretive interactions. On this pragmatic model, phenomenology, in Peirce's use of the term, is not description but rather classification of things engaged or interacted with, including the "interactors," according to basic categories. Peirce argued that all things encountered or supposed in any way can be classified in one or several of three categories.<sup>15</sup> For Peirce, all things have an immediate character, perhaps as experienced but always as simply being what they are. The immediacy of qualities is included here. This is Firstness. Because the Firstness of things is in-itself or immediate, qualities or things as Firsts do not differ from one another because they cannot be compared. We can never interpret something as a First without mediating it. Secondness is the oppositional quality of things, their in-itselfness and resistance to being absorbed into others. One of Peirce's examples is the feeling of someone pushing against you on the other side of a door; interpreting this as opposition is more than Secondness, but the opposition itself is a Second. Another of Peirce's (more fanciful)



examples is the experience of floating in a hot-air balloon above a city in the dead quiet of night when a shrieking factory whistle goes off; interpreting it by jumping is more than Secondness, but the shock is a Second. Secondness is the source of reality's correction of our bad signs and habits. Peirce's criticism of Hegel was that the latter swallowed up Secondness in interpretive Thirdness, losing the sense of reality over against all interpretation; I think he would make the same criticism of signified/signifier semiotics. Thirdness is the mediation of things so that they are brought together in some respects, related while maintaining their differences. All signs are Thirds, for Peirce. They have their own-being, Firstness, and their oppositional differences from other things, their Secondness. But their Thirdness consists in their mediating functions. Only things that are Thirds can be interpreted. Indeed, only things that are Thirds can be determinately what they are and different from other determinate things in some respect. There can be no Firsts alone, or Seconds alone, or Firsts and Seconds together, although Peirce speculated that an evolutionary metaphysics might move from Firsts to Seconds to Thirds. If there is anything determinate, it is a Third that is what it is (its Firstness) over against something different (its Secondness) mediating in some respect (its Thirdness). Experience as interpretive interaction is primarily a function of Thirdness, although the realities interpreted have their corrective secondness and all experience has the qualitative immediacy of firstness.

## II. Interactive Experience and Ritual: The Western Contribution of Confucianism

Contributing to this conversation with Casey the Continental phenomenologist and Cheng the Chinese philosopher, I want to say that Confucianism supposes experience to be very much what the pragmatists (especially I as a late pragmatist) affirm. Human life is interactive and

responsive, grasping things as having value and responding valuationally, appreciative in positive and negative senses and struggling to improve interpretive reactions. I have focused my discussion so far on Peirce because he had an explicit “phenomenology,” to which I will return shortly. But James and Dewey have even more detail about experience that resonates with the Confucian tradition. Moreover, Whitehead too can be counted as a pragmatist and he leads to even more comparative connections with Confucianism. Those points are for another time. Buddhism, with its many approaches to interpreting consciousness, is much closer to Husserlian phenomenology and I am willing to give Buddhism over to the Continental phenomenologists as a friendly conversation partner. When we get to issues of ordering life, where the millennium-old debates between Buddhists and Neo-Confucians take shape, we would need to look at the approaches to morals that relate Continental and pragmatic approaches, as I will at the end of this paper.

Now, however, I want to pick up on a specific kind of interpretive interaction that is most profitably understood in term of the Confucian tradition of ritual analysis. Although ancient beyond accounting and anticipated articulately in Confucius’ *Analects*, Confucians understand ritual in a fundamental ontological sense to supplement the material forces of nature (*qi*) and the ordering principles of Heaven (*li*). The classical slogan hails the ontological “trinity” of Heaven, Earth, and the Human. Xunzi pointed out that people have bodies with many material capacities and also emotional and intellectual capacities deriving from the source of coherence and intelligence.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, humans have a psycho-physical governing capacity that can take control of actions. But neither the material forces of physical properties nor the naturally given capacities for emotional response can tell us what is worth hating and loving, emulating or fleeing, fearing and trusting. The biological capacity to control our actions does not by itself,

without education, tell us what to control and for what purpose. In addition to Heaven and Earth, Xunzi gave metaphysical primacy also to Humanity, by which he meant the development of conventional ritualized meaning with cogent signs. These conventional interpretive rituals are habits, as the pragmatists say, and include, among many other things, learned ways of standing and moving, gesturing meaningfully, talking in the semiotic structure of some language, habits of family and personal interactions, as well as more obviously ceremonial rituals. I have elaborated in detail this pragmatic-Confucian theory of ritual, connecting pragmatic semiotics with ritual theory, in my *Normative Cultures*, which contains in its seventh chapter a long letter from Professor Cheng commenting on it.<sup>17</sup>

Not all rituals are plays among people. Some of our rituals focus mainly on the natural environment exclusive of human beings and social institutions. When gravity causes us to fall, that by itself is not a ritualized interaction with nature. But as soon as an infant learns to interpret the pull of gravity and develops habits of throwing his toys high and attempting to stand, the interactions with gravity are ritualized. Most rituals are learned with some kind of imitation. Infants imitate their elders' ways of standing. For instance, most East Asians learn to stand with their feet parallel whereas Northern Europeans stand with their toes a bit angled out. When a cancer starts growing in us without being noticed, that is a non-ritualized interaction with nature. But when we interpret how we feel as sickness and go to a doctor, thus discovering the cancer, the interaction with the cancer is ritualized. Cultures differ in the ways they ritualize illness. When the tiger in the bush did not make a telltale sound and simply pounced on the walker for dinner, the walker was not ritually interacting with the tiger. But the tiger perhaps was hunting with ritualized habits; perhaps tigers in different families ritually hunt differently. If a person were walking by the bush on the alert for tigers, and failing to escape because our

rituals for jungle-walking don't pick up on wholly silent tigers, we still were ritually engaged with the tiger.

A great many of our interactions inclusive of people and social institutions are ritually shaped for better or worse. Among the most important things in our natural environment are other people and all the social institutions and organizations of our lives. The Confucian tradition has always seen human individuals and social realities as interacting parts of the environment, specifications of nature while also being of human composition. What is especially striking in the Confucian understanding of ritual is that nearly everything we do is made possible by learned, that is, ritualized behavior. Talking with friends we are already engaging in rituals of balance against the force of gravity, rituals of greeting, rituals of language speaking, and rituals of conversational interaction, all at once. That we speak in a common language does not tell us exactly what to say, though we might also have rituals that direct the conversation to certain topics. The rituals that are explicit ceremonies, say in politics or religion, themselves are made possible only by the vast web of rituals in which the ceremonies take place. We Confucians focus on being in healthy ritual interactions with other people at all levels of civilization.

The Western intellectual traditions tend to distinguish between individual actions, institutional operations, and natural things that behave according to non-personal laws of nature. Modern Western thought has sometimes been attracted to mechanistic conceptions of nature apart from institutions and human intentions; since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mechanistic thought has been replaced by statistical senses of natural causation. Some early modern thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes have attempted to give mechanistic interpretations to social institutions and even to human choice. Max Weber's notion of the ideal type tries to predict human behavior as if behavior moves according to what would be predicted in a rational system. Neither

Continental phenomenology nor any Chinese philosophy of which I know has attempted to treat human institutions and individual behavior in a mechanistic way, although of course both give great encouragement to predicting the future.

In contrast to the Western modernity and postmodernity, both pragmatism and Chinese philosophy see individual human action and interaction, through the matrix or the web of rituals internalized and connecting individuals to other things, to be interpenetrated by ritualized institutions and all other forms of causal interaction. Nature, institutions, and individual agents are not three distinct spheres but overlapping and interpenetrating layers of different kinds of natural processes.

### III. The Self in Three Parts

Rituals of all sorts are somewhat vague forms that need to be made specific in order actually to be played. This is somewhat like the distinction prominent in Continental semiotics between a language and actually speaking in the language, which would be like the distinction between a ritual as a complex of habit-potentials and actually playing the ritual. Rituals are like dance steps: they are vague patterns and within each pattern there are many different specific ways they can be played. The vagueness (a technical notion in Peirce) of the steps means that they can be specified in different ways, perhaps even contradictory ways, by different players or even by the same player on different occasions. A person learning a ritual, like one learning a dance, can play or dance the ritual many different ways at first, perhaps not even noting how different the specifications are from one another.

As a dancer becomes more expert, however, the different specifications within the pattern become less random and more individuated. In time, the dancing becomes this individual's way

of dancing the pattern, distinct from and likely recognizable in contrast to the ways other dancers do the steps. Likewise with rituals. Though the ritual can be played by any individual in many ways, as they mature individuals individuate themselves more and more. The mature individuating of ritual playing is a large part of how we become individual selves. A small child can learn some large set of role-plays for treating mother and father. But by late adolescence most people can play those ritual roles so as to relate to their own specific mother and father, and do so as to express their own individuated ways of playing those roles that might be played quite differently by siblings.

A significant part of the human self, although not the only part, is the individuating of role playing. (I'll introduce two other parts shortly.) A mature individual is involved in playing a gazillion ritual roles all at once. Each self is a matrix (read *yin*) of ritual intersections and also the extensions of activity to play rituals overlapping within that matrix that individually reach out to interactions perhaps far distant from other rituals within the matrix (read *yang*). The rituals for relating to colleagues at work overlap those for relating to family members, but they also extend out in non-overlapping ways. Confusions about this can be embarrassing, if not disastrous. My wife once said in a fit of pique, "I am not your secretary!" And I have known colleagues (not Confucians, surely) whose secretary has said "I am not your wife!" I am playing a host of rituals on this panel. Ed Casey and I have been friends since we were college classmates; for a while we both taught at Stony Brook where he was my department chair. All these relations have a ritualized substance which he and I are playing together now. Chung-ying and I have been friends almost as long and he graciously has developed rituals that moved me in to the community of Chinese and American Confucian scholars, publishing many of my papers and setting me up to play the scholar-official role of president of the sponsoring organization of this

panel, the International Society for Chinese Philosophy. He and I have shared many more panels than Ed and I, and have a very rich set of mutually supportive academic performance rituals. I have known young Dr. Gu a much shorter time, but two of her major doctoral professors, Steve Odin and Joseph Grange, were my own doctoral students and so she thinks of me through the rituals of me being her academic Doktor Grossvater.

One of the most important things to recognize about rituals such as these is that when people play together in rituals, they can relate to both others and themselves as equally role players. Instead of the modern Western primacy of self-and-other, the basic Confucian sense of self is to be related to other players of ritual roles as one among the many selves playing. We can regard ourselves as being one among many players in any given ritual. Or to put it differently, the concrete reality is the rituals being played and ready at hand for play. Human beings conceive of themselves as ritual players among and with others, if they are alert to the rituals as such. We can conceive of the other players as themselves matrices of multitudes of rituals, just like us, but unique in their own bevy of rituals and playing reciprocal roles to ours in the ritual at hand. We see the others as working through the individuations of their ritual play just as we are, becoming more mature. From the perspective of the ritual-play itself, not just from the conscious perspective of any subject-self within, all the players are viewed as players, including ourselves with the others. The fundamental frame is not me facing the others but rather all of us playing together. This is the first part of the Confucian sense of self that I want to stress.

A second basic pragmatic Confucian part of the self comes from the observation that each of us has at our core a capacity to perceive and respond to the value-laden things around us, to the Ten Thousand things, as Confucians call the world. Each individual is a continuum from the

inner elements of response through bodily functions, postures, and actions to being able to perceive and act across space and time to connect with the other things.<sup>18</sup> Those abilities require the individual to develop language and other sets of symbols for parsing out the objects in the foreground of their environmental background, as well as interpretive knowledge, skills at moving through the natural and social environments, and many other things. Confucians emphasize the very great importance of learning so as to be able to perceive distant things through helpful theories and practical habits, and to act will. Sometimes Western phenomenologists think that the perceived world is simply given, “there” in consciousness or in experience to be analyzed. Nevertheless, consider how anyone from any culture can listen to Bach and find it interesting, perhaps pleasurable; but someone from the Chinese musical tradition would find it less comprehensible than a Westerner who recognizes its harmonies; and then note that someone with a highly refined musical conservatory education in Bach would hear much more than those of us whose musical education is at the entertainment level. It is not that the musicologist hears the same thing as us amateurs and can analyze it better. The musicologist actually hears things we amateurs miss. Perception is an achievement that requires learning. In many ways, becoming a mature self so as to relate well and responsibly to the Ten Thousand Things is like becoming a martial artist, learning to sense and bear the eddies in the *qi*.

The importance of ritual here is that my own personal self includes all the rituals I learn to play. Because the rituals, including speaking my language, intrinsically include the other people and things who reciprocally play them, the others are part of my own individual self. I am all sorts of rituals shared with others: in many places in my life, I am We. All the things playing ritual roles with me are in various senses components of my personal continua of connections with the things of the world. So, the Western ideal for the individual, to be a



subjective self over against and in relation to objective Others and the world, is hard to register on my Confucian model. Western sociologists and anthropologists often think that East Asians put the group or community ahead of the individual. But that simply is to misread the Confucian metaphysics of selfhood.

Yet a third part of the Confucian self is what the tradition calls “sincerity” or *cheng*. Sincerity is the educational ideal of becoming transparent through all the layers of the continuum each person has with the things of the world. It means eliminating selfishness that might distort perception and response. But it also means untangling our emotions that hide our motives from others and ourselves. It means practicing ritual play that relates properly to the ritual components and situation. It means learning how to be “present” to others in ritual play and elsewhere. It even means dressing right to indicate what you honestly think and feel about others and yourself. For some people, how they dress is a device to protect themselves and deceive others. For other people, how they dress is meant to “express” themselves. But for Confucians, how we dress is an attempt to be deferential to others and to ourselves, openly showing our regard with sincerity. Because so many relations are ritualized, often dress is coded for the ritual, and dressing according to code shows whether one is conforming or not, and thus showing sincerity in engaging the ritual as such. But even more, how we dress is an attempt to be respectful and vulnerable at once, without hidden agendas.

The English word “sincerity” often has the connotation of expressing oneself honestly, not holding back our feelings, “letting it all hang out,” to use a phrase that for some signifies a virtue. The Chinese word “cheng” that is translated “sincerity” has a slightly different connotation. It means first having developed the skills to appreciate other people for who they are, our institutions for the good they make possible, and surrounding nature for its many worths.

Then it means clearing up the continua of interactions that connect us with those others so that we can respond appropriately. Confucian sincerity is a clarity or transparency between the Ten Thousand Things and our inner heart with its natural openness to appropriate response.

Becoming sincere means working on oneself, yet the ground for working on oneself is not oneself but rather the nature and values of other things with which we interact. Sincerity in the Confucian sense is not expressing oneself without disguise but rather making oneself appropriately responsive to the things in the world whose nature and value need to be discovered and appreciated.

Sincerity is the deepest existential virtue for us Boston Confucians because it is so very hard to attain and failure in it is a form of existential self-contradiction. The ancient fault of Confucianism, for which it has been criticized by Daoists from the beginning, is that the emphasis on ritual can degenerate into mere formalism. When sincerity is lacking, thus is what happens. An insincere person can even individuate much role playing, or at least develop an individuated style. Sometimes insincere phonies can deceive many people, though we usually can detect a bad smell.

Confucian rituals historically have been criticized for being oppressive, with men degrading women, the rich oppressing the poor, mothers-in-law enslaving their daughters in law. This should be impossible if the men, the rich, and the mothers-in-law were truly sincere as they played the rituals with their potential victims. In each of these instances, sincerity requires true respect and appreciation of the others involved in the ritual, and ritual-play that cannot be played sincerely ought not be played. But who can completely purge selfishness, straighten out their emotions, play rituals rightly, always be humanly attentive, or afford a proper wardrobe? We

can always make progress; the Confucians say this potential for progress lies even in “small people.” But almost inevitably, despite sometimes making progress, failure blunts selfhood.

Confucians thus have a deep sensibility of tragedy. Partly this is because sincerity is so hard to attain, and even then seems to be a vagrant and ephemeral trait. This is only part of the reason for the Confucian tragic view, however.

The other part is that many of the rituals we play are corrupt and bad. Many of the traditional Confucian household rituals have such unevenness of power that women simply cannot be respected sincerely, the poor cannot be engaged by the rich with sincerity, and mothers-in-law cannot run their daughters-in-law’s family with true sincerity. Those rituals need to be changed. In our own time, think of all the rituals that carry on racism, or worsen a dysfunctional family, or sabotage a social institution, or promote war, or desecrate an environment, or keep certain people in oppressive poverty. In so many places there is an obvious need to change the rituals we have. On the one hand, Confucius and Xunzi were right that, without appropriate rituals, children cannot be reared, family life is impossible, and the body politic is a chaos of the strong against the weak. So Confucian said we need to recover the rituals of the Sage Emperors on antiquity that made high civilization possible in the first place. But on the other hand, once we have some rituals, this does not guarantee that they are the right rituals. The right rituals are those than can be played with sincerity. Sincerity is the touchstone for judging rituals. We need to remember that sincerity requires learned appreciation of the Ten Thousand Things, particularly other people, and the cultivation of one’s own sagehood of transparent appropriate behavior in the environment.

The need to change our rituals for the sake of sincere deference for all involved is at the heart of Confucian morals. To be sure, Confucian ethics includes learning some moral virtues in

order to be sincere. The recent emphasis by Roger Ames on “role ethics” rather than internal virtues appreciates the pervasiveness of rituals in the Confucian understanding of the self and others. But I believe that even more important than these well-recognized themes of Confucian morals is the imperative for active ritual analysis and the correction of bad rituals. Better than most cultures, Confucianism is sensitive to ritual and can point out how our lives operate by rituals that need to be understood as such. Whereas many cultures think that social relations, including power relations and class distinctions are “natural,” we should understand them as being ritualized all the way through, although of course not reduced to rituals alone as some “social constructivists” are likely to say. So we can learn from Confucianism to put great emphasis on analyzing and reconceiving our global societies in terms of their ritual structures, and judiciously criticizing them from the standpoint of their justice. For this, Confucians need to lighten up on their attention to the past, recovering a great history after a century of suppression. Instead we need to look outward and to the future to facilitate an appreciation of our institutionalized rituals with an eye to changing them.

Changing rituals, however, is very difficult. We late-moderns hope that changing laws will do it. But the experience in America of changing the civil rights laws shows that this has helped the African American middle class but has done little for the African-American underclass who are still in bondage to rituals of self-hate, economic self-destructiveness, and dysfunctional civic life. It is those deeper rituals that need to be changed. Confucius thought in his own time that presenting the rituals of the Sage Kings could help the problem; most scholars today believe he just made them up, his protestations of merely passing on traditions notwithstanding. Through much of Chinese history, it was believed that emulation of a wise Emperor, or a good grandfather, could develop improved rituals. Sometimes it seems today that

the most helpful models to emulate are athletes. Can we not do better? The great Confucian contribution for our time needs to be the invention and deployment of rituals that make for peace, freedom, resolution of conflict between genuinely contradictory interests, and human flourishing. Strange, this sounds like John Dewey, does it not?

Even when we have to play those rituals we must, our play should be oriented to changing the rituals themselves; and yet so often we seem to be forced to reinforce the bad elements. Perhaps most tragic is the fact that we do not now have the rituals that allow ourselves and our nations to interact peacefully and resolve disputes without war, injustice, economic suffering, or pitting the strong against the weak. One of the great advantages of many rituals is that they allow people who have directly conflicting interests and who hate one another to cooperate in the ritual dance so as to get something done, for instance run an economy or a household. You don't have to like your ritual partners in order to play the ritual with them that accomplishes something. Our world, like Confucius's, simply lacks the well-practiced rituals that allow for the settling of large economic, political, and military disputes.

Pragmatic-Confucian phenomenology of Peirce's sort is not a descriptive examination of consciousness but rather an analytical classification of the kinds of things that need to be harmonized for high civilization. The value of those classes is that they point out some of the tasks of ritual formation, as well as the difficulties of harmonizing what we simply cannot imagine how to fit together. Nevertheless, some things can be fixed. The Confucian approach to tragedy, like the pragmatist, is to feel it in the heart as sincerely as possible, lament what has happened, and then get on and try to do better next time. Pragmatic Confucians do not expect victory, only the opportunity to do the best we can on our watch, educated to appreciate both the

vast and deep values as well as the pervasive injustices in our environment. Philosophy is not just for description but for learning to appreciate and renovate.

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Acknowledgement: This essay was written by me in the process of a dialogue with Edward Casey and Cheng Chung-ying. A briefer version was presented on a panel with them. An alternative version may be published in a book of my essays tentatively titled *The Good Is One, Its Manifestations Many*.

<sup>1</sup> Pragmatism took its initial shape in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. It had American antecedents in Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and close neighbors in Josiah Royce, who called himself an “absolute pragmatist,” George Santayana, a fellow naturalist, and Alfred North Whitehead, who called his epistemology “pragmatic.” Whitehead was the doctoral mentor of Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, who edited Peirce’s philosophical papers in six large volumes. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pragmatism has seen a revival in several directions, including analytic pragmatism associated with Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom, and African/American ethical-theological work associated with Cornel West, Victor Anderson, and Eddie Glaude. These and other branches of “neo-pragmatism” have been insightfully analyzed recently by Richard J. Bernstein in *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010). But the pragmatism I work to extend is not these directions, although I learn from them. Rather my interest is in the metaphysical, cosmological, and religious dimensions of the early pragmatists. These dimensions, as well as my colleagues in this extension of the early pragmatists, are ignored by Bernstein. A better analysis of pragmatism, from the standpoint of my direction, is John E. Smith’s older *Purpose and Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978). I sometimes call myself a “paleo-pragmatist” to distinguish myself from the “neo-pragmatists.”

<sup>2</sup> See Hall and Ames’ *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1999) and Ames’ more recent *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The word “interaction” was popularized by John Dewey, who also sometimes used the word “transaction.” I often use the word “engagement” to stress the explicit or implicit intentionality in interpretive interactions. But as I shall argue here, much interpretive interaction is not conscious and so is not always deliberate engagement.

<sup>4</sup> Peirce used this formulation in many places. See for instance his early (1868) papers “Questions concerning Certain Capacities Claimed for Man” and “Consequences of Four Incapacities,” both in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings: Volume 1 (1867-1893)*, edited by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992). Those papers are frequently anthologized.

<sup>5</sup> The valuational theme in Peirce is emphasized by John E. Smith in *Purpose and Thought*. I have developed it at great length in my trilogy, *Axiology of Thinking*, consisting of *Reconstruction of Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), *Recovery of the Measure* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), and *Normative Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> This paper was originally prepared for an Eastern Division American Philosophical Association panel with Cheng Chung-ying and Edward Casey, chaired by Linyu Gu. These informal musings are illustrative of the interpenetration of interpretations the text is citing.

<sup>7</sup> See “Gibson’s Affordances” by James G. Greeno in *Psychological Review*, 101/2 (1994), 336-42.

<sup>8</sup> See Barrett’s “Skillful Engagement and the ‘Effort after Value’: An Axiological Theory of the Origins of Religion” in *The Evolution of Religion*, edited by Fraser Watts and Leon P. Turner (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> See their contributions in this volume of *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.

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<sup>10</sup> See Peirce's "Questions concerning Certain Capacities Claimed for Man, cited above. On the basic background difference between the Continental tradition's transcendental supposition and the naturalistic interactionist model in pragmatism, see my "Self-Reliance and the Portability of Pragmatism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 35/2 (May 2014), 94-107.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated from the French by Colin Smith, (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> David Strong, *Crazy Mountains: Learning from Wilderness To Weigh Technology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> See Heidegger's important essay, written shortly after *Being and Time*, "On the Essence of Truth," translated by R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick, in *Existence and Being*, edited by Werner Brock (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1949), 317-51.

<sup>15</sup> Peirce described his categories in many places. See, for instance, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings: Volume 2 (1893-1913)*, edited by The Peirce Edition Project, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>16</sup> The central text in Xunzi is his essay on *Tien*, translated Heaven or Nature. Edward J. Machle gives a particularly apt translation and careful analysis in his *Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi: A Study of the "Tien Lun"* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). A more recent study of Xunzi on ritual is *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline III and Justin Tiwald (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014). Pragmatic Confucians might also want to look at my *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> *Normative Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> This sense of the self as a continuum between the inner heart and the things of the world is based on the Doctrine of the Mean. I develop it at length in *Boston Confucianism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).