

That Asian philosophical traditions tends towards a different conception of the self than that found in Western traditions is an uncontroversial postulate of comparative philosophy. Specifically, it is commonplace to characterize the Eastern traditions as holding to a relational conception that emphasizes our inherent interconnectedness, while Western beliefs tends towards a more atomic or individualistic conception that stresses our uniqueness and individuality. Beyond this, however, there are several points of controversy, as there are disagreements as to just where the two views or sets of view actually clash. These disagreements in turn reveal deeper controversies as to just what kinds of claims about the nature of the self are on offer in specific schools of thought such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Aristotle, and so on. Often a lack of clarity on these more basic points leads to frustrating impasse, as comparative philosophers seem to be talking past one another, each arguing a point their opponents may not in fact disagree with.

I will attempt here to sketch a taxonomy of possible interpretations of what would constitute a belief in or commitment to a relational self, and suggest that some of these are less plausibly attributed to classical Confucians than others. I will also suggest a possible interpretation that has not, as far as I can tell, been explicitly considered and offers some reasons to think it might offer a plausible rendering of early Confucian views.

What is a relational self?

The place to start is with the question of what is a theory of the self in the first place. I want to begin with a basic distinction. On the one hand, we might offer an ontological or metaphysical thesis as to what constitutes a self. An example of this

would be something like what is offered by Descartes, who explicitly identifies himself with a unique and discrete object, namely his mind. This obviously would count as an atomic theory of the self, as Descartes was also willing to assert that it was logically possible, at least, for him to exist as Descartes even if he were the only person--the only thing with a mind--in the universe. Call this a version of "Ontological Atomism." A corresponding ontological thesis of a relational self would be the Buddhist doctrine of interdependent origination, which is roughly claim that all things, including ourselves as persons, exist only in relation to others in the way that an axle can only exist in relation to a wheel. I'll refer to theories along these lines as versions of "Ontological Relationalism."

A different kind of theory of the self would be a psychological theory, which speaks to what determines what we might call the contents of a self, that is, the characteristics of the person, their personality, dispositions, beliefs and values. Here the extreme individualistic position would hold that an individual's traits are determined entirely endogenously, a view that I don't think has any prominent adherents. Perhaps Descartes--who wasn't particularly concerned with this question--would have allowed it was logically possible that his ideas could have arisen entirely from within, though his settled position seems to have been that he needed to be related at least to God in order to have any thoughts at all. More realistically, a position within personality theory or child development would tend towards a psychologically atomic self to the extent it emphasized genetic factors over environmental ones in the shaping of personality, while a strongly behaviorist position would tend towards what I'll call Psychological

Relationalism in holding that it is only in their interactions with their environment, including critically their social environment, that a person's personality is shaped.

The thing to note about this initial distinction between ontological and psychological theories of the self is that the resulting spaces of possible positions are distinct, and for the most part not strongly predictive of one another. That is, that a theory is individualistic in the ontological realm does not determine what it is or must be committed to in the psychological realm. A Cartesian in the ontological sense might happily acknowledge the ineliminable role of relationships--with parents, siblings, friends, and the like--in shaping a person's personality. Conversely, someone who is strongly inclined towards a relational position psychologically may still insist that ontologically each of us is constituted as a person by a distinct and separate soul. Perhaps the only entirely impossible combination would be of extreme individualism in the psychological realm and relationalism in the ontological, as it is not clear what it would mean to say that a person could be in a constituting relationship with another without there being some kind of psychological influence.

Strong and Weak Relationalism

The second point I want to make about this taxonomy is that it suggests an intuitive distinction between strong and weak forms of relationalism. Psychological relationalism is weak in the sense that it doesn't seem to capture so readily the familiar differences comparative philosophers routinely draw between East and West. I say this because some degree of psychological relationalism has always been accepted by thinkers in the West, and it is not obviously incompatible with any prominent philosophical position held in the Western tradition. This point is worth stressing.

When comparative philosophers stress the Western atomic self and try to locate it in the works of Western philosophers, typical examples include Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, and Kant. Plainly, however, not even Kant or Descartes would deny either that humans are as a matter of fact social beings who typically live in communities, or that our actual relations with others have a lot to do with how we think, our beliefs and values, our tendencies, and so on. The sense in which Kant's moral theory is individualistic has to do with the moral relevance of our individual powers, and in particular with the idea that it is individual persons that are the proper locus of the most significant kind of moral value. While this assumes, it would seem, an ontological individualism in order to make sense of the idea of human dignity or humans as ends in themselves, it is consistent with a robust psychological relationalism that finds a place for moral education and the goods of civil life.

As for Hobbes and Locke, it is commonplace to consider their political theory as exemplary cases of individualism in their appeal to a pre-social state of nature in which individuals pursue their own interests in a state of natural freedom. This individualism carries over to the idea of a social contract freely chosen by individuals as the basis of community. But it must be remembered these accounts are in the service of political theories that assume both the inevitability of civil societies and the importance of cooperation in creating distinctly human goods. Again, while the political ideas of Locke and Hobbes make little sense without the supposition of an ontological atomism, they are compatible with a thoroughly relational psychological understanding of the self. In his writings on education Locke in particular shows himself to be deeply sensitive to the role parents and others play in shaping the minds of developing children.

For these reasons I do not think it sufficient to distinguish the understanding of the self in Confucianism from those found in the West by focussing on the latter's stress on relationships, or even by asserting that for Confucianism relationships are foundational or the proper starting point of moral thinking. Given the ambiguity of such claims between ontological and psychological readings, it is not clear that such features of Confucianism in fact distinguish it from Western philosophical ideas except as a matter of emphasis. What does the work in distinguishing the two traditions might look, therefore, to be ontological. What is distinctive of the Eastern approach would appear to be a commitment to a strongly relational ontological understanding of the self. However, it seems to me doubtful that we actually see any such thing in classical Confucian texts.

Did Confucius Have a Theory of Self?

My main reasons for arguing this is the lack of direct textual evidence of any kind of explicit theory of a relational self in the pre-Qin Confucian texts, and indeed a lack of any direct discussion of the whole question of what constitutes a person. The classical Confucian texts certainly have a lot to say about relationships, but the focus there is always on the obligations and duties adhering to very specific social roles, the virtues necessary for productive social interactions and their cultivation, and the kinds of relations that allow for and require moral growth. There is also much discussion of the perils of neglecting our relationships and the sins of the self-absorbed or selfish petty person as contrasted with the expansive affective life of the *junzi* or person of *ren*. On the face of it, however, all of this can safely be read as a kind of psychological relationalism that is in principle compatible with ontological atomism. This is certainly

not to say Confucius or Mencius held to ontological atomism. Rather, it seems to me, what constitutes a self is not the kind of question either felt inclined to address one way or another.

Now, it might be argued that while the classic texts are silent on the metaphysical realities of the self the thinkers invoked nonetheless were committed to a kind of ontological relationalism, either tacitly or by implication. And perhaps this is true, as we might predict that such a thorough going focus on relationships would more readily emerge from a tacit understanding of humans as relational through and through than any kind of atomism. Or perhaps we can demonstrate that only an ontological relationalism is ultimately compatible with the kinds of claims being made in these texts. In both cases, however, it seems we are moving into a discussion that is not one that the masters were ever party to. No doubt a time traveling Confucius could be made to understand the issue and formulate his position on reflection, but my sense is that he would find the questions novel and the answers less than obvious.

Is Confucian Relationalism Merely Psychological?

So far my remarks would suggest that the celebrated Asian focus on relationships, at least in its classical Confucian guise, is less radically at odds with Western thought than we might have suspected. If we conclude that the focus on relationships in Confucian thought appeals to no more than a psychological claim about the centrality of certain relations in human lives, we should conclude that there's nothing there that paradigmatically Western philosophers would have to disagree with. This would certainly leave plenty room for divergence, as the moral implications of our social natures are clearly drawn in quite different ways. As noted, relationships are paramount

in Confucianism while the moral dignity of the individual emerges to the forefront in various Western philosophies. But on the question of the constitution of the self we would be best off saying the two traditions simply never meet in either agreement or disagreement.

I want to suggest now, however, that there may be a way to think about the question of the self in a way that falls into neither the ontological or psychological mode, and allows for a way of distinguishing the two traditions in ways that are stronger than what psychological relationalism allows, but weaker than the ontological thesis that I've suggested may not actually be found in Confucianism. To try to articulate this I am going to borrow an idea developed and deployed by Charles Taylor in his continuing attempt to tell the history of the emergence of modernity and what he calls the 'secular age' in the Western world. This is the idea of the "social imaginary."

The Social Imaginary

What Taylor means by a social imaginary is a bit elusive, but he is getting at a level of shared understanding that is somewhere between explicit theorizing and the kind of pre-reflexive, practical or embodied knowledge that John Searle refers to as the 'Background.' At one point Taylor defines a social imaginary as "the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations." (171) What he is getting at, as I understand it, is the way in which social action--behavior that makes sense to or has meaning for ourselves and others--takes place against a shared understanding of the moral and social order in which the act will take place which

provides a kind of reparatory of understood or recognized behaviors we can draw on to act in meaningful ways. To use one of his examples, before it is possible to organize and take part in a political demonstration, we must all understand the political world in such a way that a demonstration make sense:

this act is already in our repertory. We know how to assemble pick up banners, and march. We know that this is meant to remain within certain bounds, both spatially...and in the way it impinges on others (this side of a threshold of agressivity--no violence). We understand the ritual. (173)

It's this element of being already recognized and understood and somewhat choreographed that distinguish a demonstration from a raw expression of rage in an out of control mob. The meaning of a political demonstration--why it has in the proper context more of a moral standing than an angry mob--both trades on expresses this underlying familiarity.

The aspect of this idea I want to pick up on is the idea of a shared set of images and ideas that inform or make sense of behavior of this kind. As Taylor stresses, the level at which these ideas and images are available to social actors is not necessarily the explicitly theoretical. A person can meaningfully participate in a political demonstration, for example, while being unable to offer a knowledgable theory of liberal democracy and its tolerance and recognition of public expressions of political dissent. On the other hand, it is not as though the ideas and values that are assumed by a political demonstration are invisible or completely unavailable to participants in the manner of the kind of very unreflective, embodied knowledge that goes into a skill we practice unthinkingly. It is, for example, rather difficult to make explicit just what are

doing when we perform even a simple, routine task such as opening a bottle of wine in a language that doesn't assume already meaningful acts such as "grab the bottle, take off the foil cover, etc."

The kind of knowledge Taylor is getting at takes the form of images, associations, resonances, and the like--hence the phrase "social imaginary." A modern day protester might understand her acts, for example, through association with civil rights movements or the anti-war protests of the 1960s, or perhaps by sensing a continuity between her acts today and those of labor organizers in the 1930s. We can also point here to the sense in which we all know what a protester looks like, and how she acts--the imaginary provides us with, as it were, a cast of a characters for different kinds of social settings that we can appeal to either to guide our own acts or makes sense of those of others.

An important function of the social imaginary is its shaping of the kinds of theoretical questions are likely to be asked at any given historical moment. In a world where the political protest is something we all understand it makes sense to ask about the basis for its legitimacy, or the limits of morally acceptable protest, or by extension the moral grounds for justified political violence. The influence goes both ways--theoretical innovations can make their way back to the imaginary, broadening or changing the space of possible social action in previously unimaginable ways as new images and associations are discovered or forged. This is particularly important for Taylor's project, though my concern here is more on the first direction of influence. The celebrated relational self of Confucianism is I think a reflection of a social imaginary that made questions about humans relationships much more natural and pressing than any

about the constitution of a 'self'. It is at this level that we need to look for what is distinctly Confucian.

The Pre-Qin Social Imaginary

Earlier I distinguished two levels at which we could think about the self, the ontological and the psychological. With the idea of a social imaginary we are considering something closer to the phenomenological--we are concerned with how the world and our place in it is understood and experienced. Again, we are not postulating a necessarily explicit and theoretical understanding, but rather the sense in which certain things are readily imaginable to people of the day, and how this both encouraged and constrained theorizing. To say that the Pre-Qin social imaginary was relational, then, is to say that the images, associations and resonances available to make sense of behavior and actions tended to draw on our relatedness as embodied in specific, established and unchallenged social roles and family ties. It is also to say that this imaginary made questions about these relationships and social roles more readily and meaningfully asked than questions about our ultimate individuality and private lives. This is not to say the latter questions were literally impossible, or that they were precluded by an explicit or even implicit theory or understanding of the self that would deny that we exist as individuals. Again, I tend to doubt that any such theory was in the offing. Rather the claim is that the social setting of the time made images of, for example, good and bad sons and daughters readily accessible resources for imagining real and possible social and moral realities. Additional characters and events readily at hand would include both loving and monstrous parents, the aesthetic power of a well

performed public ceremony, the socially harmonizing influence of music and poetry, and the unescapable reality of kin relations.

The Social Imaginary and Philosophical Thought Experiments

To illustrate how I think this might be a fruitful way to think about Eastern relationalism and Western individualism, I'd like to finish by considering some well known passages from the *Analects* and *Mencius* about the sage-king Shun in light of my remarks. In particular, I want to compare these passages to the well known and celebrated 'state of nature' stories offered by the classical liberal theorists of the Enlightenment. Obviously the comparison will not be at the level of the details of the stories, or even their immediate intent. Instead I want to highlight the comparable status of these stories as illustrative of the respective social imaginaries of the pre-Qin and Enlightenment worlds.

The state of nature stories of Locke and Hobbes and others fall somewhere between history and mythology. No one should suppose they are based on actual study of the origins of human societies, but at the same time they are offered as illuminating our current situation, and so not as mere flights of fancy. To complain that since they are plainly false these stories cannot make for good political philosophy is to miss the point. Following Taylor, I think these stories are best treated as deliberate extensions of images recently made possible in a cultural setting increasingly taken by ideas of equality, freedom and individualism. In this capacity these stories act as distillations of possibilities that had begun to seem increasingly real--they present an imagined world which has no place for natural hierarchies and transcendently imposed social orders that builds on ideas and images of freely chosen acts increasingly in

common circulation. The results are illuminating to the extent they bring into relief shortcomings and injustices in actual existing societies and suggest possible remedies by, in the case of Locke for example, rendering revolt against tyranny intelligible and compelling. In this sense they represent increasingly explicit attempts to theorize what had emerged in the social imaginary of the time.

In telling stories of the legendary filial piety of the young Shun, Mencius also seems to be operating at a level somewhere between history and myth. Surely the stories of Shun's steadfast devotion to his horrible parents will strike many as impossible on the face of it, knowing what we know of human psychology. Surely no one could suffer such abuse and remain so devoted to his abusers as to weep in the fields at his own failures to win the love of his tormentors. At the very least we would have to wonder at the mental health, never mind the moral character, of someone so seemingly unwilling or able to say 'enough.' Here too, though, it is surely a mistake to dismiss the stories as mere myth, as they clearly have been understood to reveal important truths about the centrality of filial piety in the development of good character by acting as a kind of distillation of an already understood image, in this case that of the dutiful and devoted son.

In both the *Mencius* and *Analects* the stories of Shun are taken to be politically illuminating as well, and in the same sense. In *Analect 15.5* Confucius remarks on the ability of the now Emperor Shun to rule while effortlessly: "if anyone could be said to have effected proper order while remaining nonassertive, surely it was Shun. What did he do? He simply assumed an air of deference and faced due South." So powerful was his *de*, the kind of moral charisma and influence Shun could wield simply by virtue

of his extraordinary character, the people would spontaneously order themselves throughout the empire. With its ties to passages such as 2.1, 2.3 and 12.19 we are given an image of a kind of political power that relies almost exclusively on moral influence and example rather than force and coercion. Here too complaints that this is unlikely to have been literally true of Shun's actual reign miss the point. Instead we should attend to the power of the image as a distillation of possibilities already sensed, an image that could then be used by Mencius to devastating effect in criticizing the corrupt rulers of his time. Mencius' claims about 'benevolent government' can accordingly be understood as more explicit theorizing that emerges out of the social imaginary.

Conclusion

There are a couple of senses in which the state of nature stories are individualistic in the way the Shun stories are relational. Most literally, the state of nature stories are about individuals and the reasons they might have to forgo natural freedom for civil life, while the Shun stories illustrate a virtue and a kind of power that literally exist only in relationships. For its part, the individualism of the state of nature stories this was tied to explicit theorizing as to the constitution of the person. However, in both cases I would argue that the kind of understanding of things at the level of the social imaginary was prior. Through the confluence of several profound social changes driven by among other things the Protestant Reformation, the incipient emergence of capitalism, and the continuing and developing dominance of Christianity and its relationship to worldly powers, it became increasingly easier for Western thinkers of the time to imagine a world in which isolated individuals might come together to form a

society from scratch, and to suppose that this might tell us something about the moral basis of legitimate government, the proper reach of its powers, and so on. The same imaginary also provides the impetus for similar explorations of possible ranges of individualism, finding its extreme to the lingering western fascination with stories of feral children, Robison Caruso type cast aways, pre-civilized 'savages' and so on.

In a similar way the historical and cultural setting of the late Zhou/Warring States Period tended the thinkers of the time towards a concern with a complex of ideas that included *xiao* and *de*. The social imaginary here was one that suggested images that could feed into the stories passed on about Shun and other legendary and otherworldly but nonetheless seemingly real sage kings. In this case, however, it is not so clear that the results included a corresponding relational theory of the self. Not surprisingly perhaps, what did develop was a highly sophisticated and deeply insightful tradition of serious thought about our relationships themselves.