Notes toward a Comparative Study of the Concept Skill in Mencius 5B:1.7 and Its Implications for Self-Culture

Part 2: Biblical and recent Western thought.

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II

Comparisons with Biblical thought and some 20th century thinkers: Maritain, Dewey, Santayana, Ryle.

The dialectic of the will pointed to by Mencius (5B:1.7) with his analogy from archery — that one reaches the mark by reason of strength but it is not owing to strength that one hits it — seems based on the fundamental intuition that right action, successful aim, is activity of the total person. The recognition of this duality in unity enables him to observe the relation between timeliness and self-fulfillment as a six-fold polar structure: wisdom / sageness; beginning / ending; skill / strength, i.e., skill, wisdom and beginning are dialectically opposed to strength, sageness and ending. Since these oppositions are by nature polar they are interdependent and form an organic whole. They are not an opposed aggregation of parts atomistically related. This secures them against a merely quantitative reduction since an abstract analysis of their elements will not suffice to grasp their root significance. One, himself, must be living out their principle or miss their meaning.

Biblical:

The creation story of Genesis I has, I think, an ontological implication which lends support to this vision of Mencius. In the Genesis

series of primordial creative acts the separation of the waters into above and below is the only instance that requires the severing of one body into two. This establishes a duality, ~~an instinctive division~~ within one and the same element and nature.

The duality in unity between righteousness and peace contains also the polarity between initiative and response (beginning and ending) as was observed in Isa. 45:8. Righteousness, like skill in Mencius, begins ~~manifests itself~~ in action that suits the purpose, that conduces to the good end. Peace, an ongoing consummation and not a terminus, is like ending or completion in Mencius in that completion links the end of one movement to the beginning of another. Like Aristotle's material cause it supports the procession of forms as the principle of continuity in change.

It is not difficult to see in this biblical vision a structure which, though ~~while~~ expressed in a different idiom, is akin to that which Mencius describes in his effort to reveal the depth dimension in both the movements of self-transformation and natural ~~process~~ process. The likeness of concern and concept between the two traditions becomes clear at the point where both declare that the activities proper to timeliness and wholeness (self-unification) are intemporally related and reciprocally reinforcing within the chung shih cycle as discussed ~~[illegible]~~ in Part I of this essay.

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Ryle: The Concept of Mind,

In his essay, ~~—~~ The Concept of Mind, Ryle offers a discussion of skill which is in sharp contrast to the way it is conceived and expressed in both biblical and Mencian terms. In his

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a effort to refute Cartesianism through an attack upon "the ghost in the machine" he successfully indicates the untenable character of a mind-body dualism. Such an effort might ~~encourag~~ encourage one to think that his argument makes common cause with the holistic character of Confucian thought. But there are crucial differences between his position and the Confucian understanding of human behavior. In Ryle's discussion there is nothing corresponding to the issue of moral growth. He cannot ~~take~~ talk about the mind prone to err, which conduces to a negative act ~~which~~ that in no way results from <u>not</u> following a rule. For Ryle, knowing <u>how</u>, while not a single track disposition, is nonetheless exercised by observing ~~rules~~ rules or canons or ~~the~~ applying criteria. A grasp of these and skill in their execution enables the normal person to do ("can do") many things which the idiot cannot do — such as, perhaps, excelling at chess. But the issue of moral growth is not encountered at the level of one's competence to perform specific operations. One cannot ~~to~~ analogize the art of living to a game of chess precisely because existence has always the first move and its initiative cannot be wrested from it nor determined in advance. Rather, moral growth — the immanent objective of the art of living — depends upon a movement of the will: whether one will or will not (not can or cannot) voluntarily submit to this ontological

condition which imposes the limits of finite freedom. This requires the activity of the total person and cannot be opposed to one activity among others, or specified by these or those rules, canons or criteria.

Ryle misses not only the issue of moral growth but, correlatively, he does not understand the expression "coming to the light" (John 3:21) which refers to seeing something which is inherently conscious — an interior activity. Since there is nothing in his analysis corresponding to vision he misses the crucial activity of contemplation which itself is not a matter of following rules since it is ~~an~~ activity that can be done rightly or wrongly. Ryle's definition of marksmanship as "a complex of skills" is difficult to distinguish from the behaviorist position.

Mencius can speak of <u>moral</u> skill on the basis of his vision of moral growth ~~i~~ as possessing ~~[illegible]~~ its own <u>immanent</u> demands rather than a demand imposed from without. He saw the ideal element within human nature which makes it possible to improve it, namely, its potential capacity to embody the mind of Tao.

Dewey: A Common Faith, Yale, 1934, pp. 16–19, 33.

Whereas Ryle sees a preexistent standard as the measure of intelligent capacities built up by training, e.g., marksmanship is measured by hitting this selected target rather than some other, Dewey grasps that moral growth entails the transformation of all standards. On this account the distinction between the mind prone to err and the mind of Tao ~~[illegible]~~ can be accomodated to his vision of moral activity. He distinguishes between those changes in ourselves in relation to the world which are merely adaptive and those ~~that~~ whose scope includes our being in its entirety. These changes entail no specifiable resolve or choices but are based on a movement of will which is not decision. "It is a change of will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change in will."

The crucial role of imagination in the composing and harmonizing of the self appears in his statement that "The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection." Indeed, he remarks that the idea of a whole is not a literal but an imaginative idea. Since the harmonizing of the self operates only through imagination there can be no question of one's making a special act of willing or deciding. Such a special act requires a particular

object for its aim and focus. Existence, or the world grasped as a whole, ~~cannot~~ is no such object yet it requires that the self be harmonized with it or remain untranquil. Given, then, that one cannot choose to be in the world correctly—though the need to unify the self remains insistent—only one healing possibility offers itself: a change of will rather than in will. Such a change requires a total orientation, receptivity and openness to being.

Skill as a means or application of wisdom attains to a different significance when, operating within ~~relative to~~ this change of will. Now it is seen to apply to an attitude that informs all the elements of our being and is employed to maintain ~~this~~ a massive affirmation of existence in the face of every particular occasion for negating it and so falling into the mind prone to err. Each step in one's passage from birth to and through death is self-transformative when made in the mind of Tao. The mind of Tao enables, upon each instant ~~skillful~~ a skillful refusal to exercise the mind prone to err. Each such refusal, instant by instant, marks a new beginning, as with Shun, in walking along the path of humanity and righteousness.

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Like Dewey, Maritain relates the activity of willing to the whole self, not only as the act of the person as such but as revealing the person to itself. Thus one is always able to determine the spirit of one's conduct — whether one is acting toward the good opportunistically (for profit, as in the Confucian rejection of that motive) or behaving with seriousness and sincerity. Both these theses grasp the act of the person as intemporally related to vision. A literal translation of John, 3:21 consonantly reflects this philosophical understanding of the human act: "the one who is doing the truth is coming to the light". I.e., while one is realizing truth is action, upon the same instant his understanding deepens and expands. The rectitude of our willing conditions the accuracy of our vision.

Chu Hsi's observation that righteousness is not necessarily fulfilled merely by doing good, nor humanity fulfilled merely by one's being correct, indicates his awareness that adequate human conduct is not essentially a matter of rules. This parallels the Scholastic and Maritain's understanding of the virtue of prudence as requiring that every particular case is willed in a particular way of conforming to the end since

no single moral case can be absolutely identical with another. This draws Maritain to see that "the truth of the prudential judgment is considered in relation to the 'undeviating' intention (per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum), not in relation to the event."

There seems little, if any, distinction to be made between Maritain's concept, "undeviating attention" and the Confucian virtue of firmness or correctness. Both refer to the ability to remain persevering in right action despite every conceivable occasion for abandoning one's course, i.e., continuity in change. (cf. Hexagram 32, The Image, "--- Thus the superior man stands firm and does not change his direction." Wilhelm/Baynes trans.).

In Part I, p. 7, of this essay where some analysis is made of Mencius' pointing to virtue with an analogy from archery, it is observed that, "No precise duplication of a former shot is possible since in the meantime conditions in one or more respects have changed. Meeting such changes adaptively requires patience and staying-power, strength, qualities preeminently in the sage --- Adaptive in his strength and firmly ordered in his skill he maintains his fixed direction while changing with the times, and so he keeps on going well." Such an operative habit resides chiefly in the will and perfects in the line of its own nature the person it informs. It functions as an abiding quality of mind and

must not be confused with the modern notion of habit, a compulsive, mechanical tendency, routinely expressed.

It is instructive to observe a New Testament text (I John 3:7, 9) which because of an incorrect translation has caused untold mischief in Christian moral theology: "Whosoever is born of God --- cannot sin, because he is born of God." But the Greek does not read "and he cannot commit sin" as the meaning has been rendered, but rather "and he cannot go on sinning," the verb for sin being in the present active infinitive — not in the aorist act. infin. The same sense is observed in v. 3 which literally translated is: "He that keeps on doing righteousness is righteous ---" The point made by the apostle is one of abiding tendency not individual particular acts, of which no aggregated sum ~~[illegible]~~ can ~~[illegible]~~ by their own activity ~~[illegible]~~ raise the level of being of the person. Only that quality of mind as a permanent condition which perfects in the line of its own nature the person it informs can generate the "seriousness to straighten the internal life and the righteousness to square the external life" (Hexagram 2, line 2).

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In a remarkable statement on the nature of intent as "action in the sphere of thought" Santayana attempts to raise our grasp of intent above the level

of mere feeling to that of aspiration, passage, awareness of an object which at times elides ~~that~~ any feeling for it altogether. He observes that "the parts do not contain the movement of transition which makes them a whole." Perhaps it would not distort his meaning to say that this transition is the movement of a being's growth in capacity to express its latent qualities — a capacity for self-disclosure which is touched off by the shifting character of its circumstantial field. This movement of transition is based on an ideal tendency immanently possessed by the being itself and is in no way reducible to physical categories.

It is simply the case that things tend ideally not only to hold to their stations in being but also to expand their influence, all things being equal. Concious beings meet intent with intent. They perform an act of valuation which if correctly made establishes and underwrites each of their careers from strength to strength.

Such a vision grasps the essentially dramatic aspect of existence which sees that things are not only related to themselves but also to what is not themselves and the translation of all these relations requires an activity that transcends the given. Life, absorbed from without, radiates outward and upward as it reaches toward its fulfilment, namely, intellect whose act of intelligence points always toward an immanent perfection. This

perfection, grasped imaginatively, impresses the organism with a prophetic, oracular and practical aim embodied in intent as ~~the~~ action in the sphere of thought.

Intent, when successful, in Santayana's terms, exemplifies skill in suiting action to the purpose and indicates intellect's essence as practical. This refusal to envision the ideal order as divorced from the daily round of commonplace affairs conforms to the Confucian radical concern for self-transformation which is understood and promoted as the most valuable and practical of human activities.

Explanatory note:

The following discussion is an attempt to see what genuine comparative aspects obtain among Confucian, Biblical and recent contemporary western thought. I included the relatively longer and more technical analysis of biblical thought in an effort to compare an ancient western text which I hoped might serve as a bridge from earlier Confucian thought to the present. If preferred, one can omit the biblical discussion and begin with the four recent western thinkers beginning with p. 24.

The purpose of Parts I and II of the paper is to make a beginning toward 1) abstracting the formal principle of self-cultivation which is embodied in timeliness and 2) to abstract the principle of one's functional relation to ultimacy or Tao in its aspect of finality. This is embodied, I think, in self-unification or wholeness.

when exercised

^ it can yield information but not understanding. ~~It produces~~ Actualized, it produces a condition Confucius perhaps in part referred to when he says that only the most intelligent and the most stupid do not change (Analects 17:3). Had Legge grasped this he would not likely have said of Mencius 2A:6.7: "How is it that after all his analyses of our nature to prove its goodness, the application of his principles must begin with an IF?"

The power to negate will being is itself a gift of human nature and the conscious refusal to exercise this negation establishes in act the humane character of human finite freedom and autonomy. Mencius shows himself aware of this in 1B:16.3: 'When men say of themselves that they cannot develop the four principles, they play the thief with themselves' (Legge).

Like skill, this negative human power when correctly ordered opens out on mystery and Tao. Its discovery and proper function are matters of practice and continual acquiring - not permanent possession. If this is correct then Mencius, who grasped the nature of the will so well and at forty attained to an unperturbed mind (2A:2.1) must have from that time forward been always joining the end to the beginnings.

(To be continued)

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What has all this to do with the waters of Genisis I? Much, since none of the above differentiations are independent of the duality called heaven and earth, and these come into manifest being after the waters are divided--not before. It is apparent that from the beginning of the Spirit's moving upon the waters to the separation of light from darkness to separation of the waters from the waters from which follows the distinction of the heavens above and the earth beneath. In the same order righteousness and mercy are associated with heaven as peace and truth are with earth--as noted earlier on. Analagously, then, the primordial association of righteousness is with the upper waters (cf. Isa.45:8) and peace with the lower.

from the very beginning of the Genesis account primordial duality obtains—

The stark importance of this correlation lies in its suggestion for the foundations of human behaviour, since if the biblical vision of the nature of man is fundamentally correct it is always incumbent upon him to engage activity which works toward harmonizing the existential duality within himself. All attempts to overlook or reduce this duality to an undifferentiated chaos must be assaults which he misguidedly makes upon his own nature. Such responses to his impatience and frustration with his contingent existence reveal a deeper motivation than the desire to play the tragic hero. Rather, they betray his vague apprehension that his own nature (as with the Waters) is essentially one; and that its existential duality requires from him an immeidate and appropriate response which, when based solely on his

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