

Perpetual Thriving: an existentialist analysis

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Abstract:

The relevance of Heidegger's existentialist analysis of *Dasein* does not consist in its exhaustive understanding of man's existential structure but in its suspension of cultural tradition by means of phenomenological reduction in order to show an existentialist aspect of that structure, namely being-toward-death. The cultural tradition of China, however, discloses another existentialist feature of man, namely perpetual thriving or *shengshengbuxi*. We intend to separate the existential experience from the exposition of that cultural tradition in order to make an existentialist analysis of perpetual thriving and thus to demonstrate a different existential horizon: here *Dasein* is no longer uncanny but is at home from the beginning; family is not only a basic form of social organization but represents an existential structure that passes from generation to generation; filial piety, the principal virtue in the family, reveals the continuity characteristic of life as well as the generative mechanism of ethics in the cultural tradition of China. Moreover, the analysis of the continuity of life in terms of perpetual thriving also shows the existentialist generative mechanism of politics, ethics, *Bildung*, attitude to life, and sense of history.

Keywords:

thriving, family, filial piety, enjoyment, *Bildung*, teacher-father, sense of history

Existentialist philosophy liberates traditional Western philosophy, i.e., the philosophy from ancient Greece to Hegel, from the maze of traditional philosophical concepts and categories. As a kind of rational configuration, philosophy indeed has such a strong Grecian flavor that, according to Heidegger, it speaks Greek. This seriously hinders Western philosophy from expressing its own existential experience and thus gives rise to a phenomenological-existentialist revolution in philosophy that suspends each and every distinct cultural tradition by means of phenomenological reduction in order to show its existential structure. Phenomenology's slogan "back to the things themselves" allows philosophy to break the bonds of traditional philosophical concepts and categories and makes possible the studies that return to the existential experience. The existential accounts of *Dasein* by Heidegger, of for-itself and for-others by Sartre, and of the encounter with the Other by Levinas all evince the revolutionary nature of phenomenological-existentialist philosophy. Such accounts of the existential structure are very instructive for the analysis of that structure in the cultural tradition of China because they enable us to separate the existential experience from the exposition of cultural tradition, to interpret a cultural tradition with regard to the existential structure, and to achieve a more universal interpretation.

1. The existentialist analysis of being-toward-death

In Heidegger's existentialist analysis, his exposition of death constitutes a major part of the analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. The problem of death or being-toward-death is pivotal in his attempt to outline *Dasein* on the whole. There is in *Dasein* always something outstanding or not yet actual; if no longer outstanding, *Dasein* is no longer there or ends up with death. Heidegger makes it clear that it is impossible for individual life to prolong this authentic feature of *Dasein* infinitely, and that death is the very moment at which the individual's being-a-whole proves to be finite and subject to Heidegger's existentialist analysis. Some claim this part of Heidegger's exposition to be a secular theology, which can answer the puzzling question of why his inquiry into the meaning of being begins from death. The most important role religion plays in human life is to provide the meaning of life, to give an answer to our finite life from the ultimate perspective. Therefore, this answer may not come from Heidegger himself but is to be found in the cultural tradition of Christianity in the West. The Christian comprehension of life is arguably the archetype of the comprehension of the meaning of life in the cultural tradition of the West, which features strong awareness of death and strong expectation of the Last Judgment. In our everyday life, death is the fading away of life, the turning point at which life passes from existence to inexistence. Death is always the subject of contemplation in philosophy and religion in the cultural tradition of the West and lies at the very heart of the Christian faith: the statement that God "redeemeth thy life from destruction" (*Psalms* 103:4) expresses the fundamental longing of Christianity. As the terminal point of life, death obstructs the path of existence and is to be overcome with the help of Jesus Christ: the faith in Christ delivers eternal life. Life in this world has to come to an end, so how can we take care of life after death? Where will the soul go? How will the body dissipate? This is the most fundamental anxiety about life in the cultural tradition of the West against the dark and indifferent background of the universe. It is only God that redeems man and guarantees man life after death—Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of mankind. In such picture of life, the continuation of life after death is most crucial and the meaning of the existence in this world. Death is the turning point or, more precisely, the connection point between two lives, the bridge between life before it and life after it. Death is an eternal theme in the cultural tradition of the West; Plato regards philosophy to be the "practice of death", that is, the preparation for entering life after death. The theme of death is therefore the point of convergence at which the Grecian and the Christian traditions are combined.

By virtue of eternal life, life after death transcends the finiteness of life and endows life in time with an eternal meaning; at the same time, morality ("love thy neighbor") can rest on a firm ground through the mediation of life after death ("love the Lord"). But Nietzsche's words "God is dead" sounds a thunderous knell: when the understanding of life is no longer guaranteed by God, one can only imagine the impact that topples the most secure foundation and necessitates secular society. After the death of God, therefore, it is the philosopher's indispensable duty to find the meaning of life again. Here a shift takes place quietly: the paradigm focusing on death in the cultural tradition

of the West develops into the existentialist comprehension of the individual's finiteness in modern society. Although Heidegger draws the concept of death out of his existentialism itself, we can view the problem of death as the entrance to the comprehension of life on the basis of a broader cultural background, its emphasis being either life after death or, for Heidegger, life before death. Heideggerian existentialist philosophy takes death as the fundamental starting point for the understanding of life and proposes an authentic understanding of death. It uncovers *Dasein's* existentialist being-a-whole through *Dasein's* anxiety about death.

Authentic death is for Heidegger not an event in life; *Dasein* does not encounter its own death in the surrounding world, for *Dasein* no longer exists once it encounters death. Death is a possibility of *Dasein's* experience of being rather than something present-at-hand or some objective entity. Such differs from the animal's death, which amounts only to an organism's ceasing to live. What is distinctive of *Dasein*, however, is a full appreciation of its inevitable death that has a fundamental effect on its whole existence. Death, the very possibility we are faced with throughout our life, renders absolutely impossible any existence of *Dasein*. Accordingly, Heidegger claims that it is within this relationship, which is the ownmost relationship of *Dasein*, that the existential structure of being-toward-death is revealed; he basically regards man's existence to be life destined to death. He no longer searches for the meaning of life in life after death *à la* Christianity, but attempts to establish authentic life in finite life.

Death as the possibility of no-longer-being-there helps Heidegger disclose individual *Dasein's* wholeness and finiteness. For only when faced with death can authentic life truly discern its possibilities and actualize in its finite life various possibilities that it projects onto itself or the world. Heidegger values death in order to highlight the future as possibility, to highlight some kind of expectation and scheme that *Dasein*, constrained by death, strives to project onto its life in this world—this is Heidegger's articulation of being-toward-death in his account of *Dasein's* existential structure. He thus portrays the wholeness of *Dasein's* existence, which is a whole constituted by all instants of its concrete existence; but this at the same time manifests *Dasein's* finiteness or the necessity of its ultimate fate in the course of its persistence from one instant to another. Such is the most fundamental feature of *Dasein's* existential structure. Death is basically the end of life that cannot be grasped, and is a foreign and unpredictable possibility that nevertheless has to come true. Heidegger's existentialist analysis amplifies this break of the stream of life.

There are some particular points worth noting in Heidegger's account. First, the fundamental state-of-mood of being-toward-death is anxiety. The anxiety about death is of course not a weak emotion but manifests the fundamental characteristic of *Dasein's* existence: to live with the clear awareness of man's mortality is to always face the threat to and the emptiness of its existence, and to make choices against this background. Heideggerian anxiety is the anxiety about being-in-the-world as such, about the world itself that unfolds as the world, rather than specific beings or their

ensemble—his conception of the world does not represent any specific entity. Heidegger emphasizes in his analysis of anxiety that *Dasein* is to be involved in the world and that *Dasein*'s ownmost being-in-the-world is opened up through anxiety. “[W]hat anxiety is about is the world as such. The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the nothing and nowhere does not signify the absence of world, but means that inner-worldly beings in themselves are so completely unimportant that, on the basis of this insignificance of what is inner-worldly, the world is all that obtrudes itself in its worldliness.” (*Being and Time*, 187, original German page number) From anxiety Heidegger brings about nothing, darkness behind being, and the fundamental state of not-at-home or uncanniness.

The counterpart of this is Heidegger's account of thrownness, which means that it is in anxiety that *Dasein* is thrown into its whereabouts and begins its existential project. In its thrownness, being-toward-death is separated from its various everyday determinations, and hence *Dasein* is no longer *das Man* that falls into everyday life; inauthentic life is thoroughly negated in this way. The Heideggerian project is not a design of the self for which a plan is made; “as *Dasein*, it has always already projected itself and is, as long as it is, projecting.” (*Being and Time*, 145) *Dasein*'s project may either be projected onto its ownmost possibilities or onto the world to which it falls prey.

Despite his fierce critique of modernity, Heidegger's existentialist account of *Dasein* is in essence totally consistent with the modern understanding of the individual. “Individual” means “indivisible” and usually does not denote an individual person exclusively but an individual entity, a unit that is divided from others and no longer divisible. It can be an individual that is separated from its group and no longer divisible, or a basic unit that is separated from the stream of life and no longer divisible. Only in relation to death, therefore, can our existence become a true individual. “Individual” essentially implies the demarcation between life and death, which embodies the wholeness of the individual itself and shows with no alternative the individual's finiteness; most fundamentally, the classic Heideggerian account implies the break of the stream of life.

2. The existential structure of perpetual thriving

According to Heidegger, the answer to the meaning of being consists first in *Dasein*'s appreciation of being, which is the path along which we approach the meaning of being. Being-toward-death constitutes *Dasein*'s understanding of its own way of being and leads to an existentialist analysis that essentially draws from the perspective of the break of being *Dasein*'s authentic characteristics such as individuality and finiteness, and is reasonable in a most profound sense. Heidegger's analysis shows his deep recognition of individual life. As is known to all, respect for individual life serves as a standard of modern civilization and the celebration of individual freedom acts as a source of the inexhaustible creativity of the modern world. In this sense, the Heideggerian doctrine still has an intimate relationship with modernity. This profound doctrine, however, remains a

seriously limited one and incapable of fully disclosing the meaning of being. It can be said that Heidegger's revelation of *Dasein*'s existential structure only elaborates one extreme of the interpretation of life. While being-toward-death provides the ground for *Dasein*'s way of being, the experience and appreciation of perpetual thriving of life is also very important: the existential structure based on thriving is not the motion of a present thing but a ground on which life determines its own way of being. This is precisely the blind spot of the understanding of life in the cultural tradition of the West that completely obscures the existential structure based on perpetual thriving. We intend to throw light on the positive aspect of the meaning of being by means of the existential structure featuring thriving.

Contemporary neo-Confucians also find that the understanding of death in the cultural tradition of China differs from that in the West, but their standpoint is not quite appropriate. For them, the cultural tradition of China teaches man "to face up to both life and death. It is said that man should give up his life in order to fulfill Goodness or *ren*, and let life go and choose righteousness or *yi*; the determined officer never forgets that his end may be in a ditch or a stream; the brave officer never forgets that he may lose his head; all of this asks man to confront the issue of death and to highlight the value of *ren* and *yi*, which surpasses that of individual life." It is certainly right for contemporary neo-Confucians to stick to *ren* and *yi*, but they fail to grasp the authentic understanding of life, let alone uncover the existential structure in the cultural tradition of China. The point here is not to replace or overcome the ephemeral meaning of individual life with the value of *ren* and *yi* and to emphasize the transcendence of such value over individual life, but to reveal the fundamental understanding of the existential structure in the cultural tradition of China.

From the existentialist perspective, death indicates the end of individual life despite not being an object of experience; life is also an existentialist fact in relation to death. Life or *sheng* is both the beginning of life and accompanies the entire course of life, both birth and growth; furthermore, it points to the future or the possibility of the unfolding of life toward the future from generation to generation. This is directly related to the fecundity of life, on the basis of which a different existential structure can arise. Perhaps fecundity is for Heidegger too close to biology to be included in his theoretical horizon. But fecundity is actually by no means a mere biological activity; it involves the continuation of life that differs from the animal's continuation of the existence of its species by means of reproduction: just as man can appreciate his inevitable death, he can also appreciate the meaning of fecundity to the stream of life, namely perpetual thriving. This is also an important resource for the understanding of the existential structure that is distinctive of the cultural tradition of China.

It is *Zhouyi* that can best embody the characteristic of the cultural tradition of China in this respect. *Zhouyi* regards the whole world as a life phenomenon that alters and flows universally; to use the terminology of existentialist philosophy, it stresses very much the continuity of being. While Tu

Weiming considers “The Continuity of Being: Chinese visions of nature” (*Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, 67–78) from the perspective of Chinese visions of nature, which puts great emphasis on the doctrine of *qi* in Chinese philosophy, the present essay will not employ this perspective. In the light of Heidegger’s distinction between the ontological and the ontic levels, the problem of perpetual thriving first dwells on the ontological level and stresses the continuity of being. As is said in “Xici,” “The great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining of life,” and “Production and reproduction is what is called (the process of) change or *yi*,” (*The I Ching*, 381, 356) so the greatest virtue between heaven and earth is perpetual thriving, and it is only in this sense that the meaning of being can be grasped. The emphasis *Zhouyi* puts on thriving provides us with a clue to understanding the existential structure in the cultural tradition of China. According to Kong Yingda’s interpretation, “‘thriving’ means ‘without cease.’ ... Everything thrives constantly, which is called change. ... Life has to be accompanied by death, but *Zhouyi* is concerned with persuasion and dissuasion and praises people for good deeds, so it talks about life instead of death.” The focus here shifts from “everything thrives constantly” to the appreciation of human life, or from the way or *dao* of heaven to the way of man in traditional terms. That is to say, the problem of thriving is discussed on a specific ontic level or analyzed in an existentialist way. The emphasis on how the continuity of the stream of life unfolds in man’s existential structure echoes what is indicated in the subtitle of this essay, namely “an existentialist analysis.” To value continuity or break ontologically will lead to different existentialist orientations.

Such profound comprehension of the continuity of everything’s being in *Zhouyi* is not abstruse metaphysics but immediately manifests itself as the presuppositions of our everyday life and informs our appreciation of our own existence. The idiom “The Foolish Old Man removes the mountains” or *Yugongyishan* involves such an ontological subtlety. Since the Foolish Old Man aspires to remove the big mountains blocking his doorway, he cannot but be mocked by the Wise Old Man; but he says cheerfully that “though I shall die, I have sons; sons will give birth to grandsons, who will in turn have sons, who will again have sons and then grandsons—I will have offspring without cease! They shall raze the mountains.” The key thrust of this idiom does not consist in the Foolish Old Man’s own spirit of perseverance but in the fundamental presupposition about life hidden behind, the understanding of the stream of life based on fecundity. Such perseverance of life does not depend on God’s grace of eternal life bestowed on the individual but is an ode to perpetual thriving in the ontological sense.

Furthermore, the Foolish Old Man’s existential structure expresses the infinite expectation for perpetual thriving of the stream of life. While being-toward-death entails *Dasein*’s individuality and finiteness, the Foolish Old Man’s existentialist account shows the continuity and infinity of the stream of life. Regarding the circulation of life, it further expresses a positive recognition of and passion for life, and derives a fundamental attitude to human life from life as “the great virtue of

heaven and earth.”It is therefore said in “Xiangzhuan” that “Heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength. The superior man or *junzi*, in accordance with this, nerves himself to ceaseless activity.”(*The I Ching*, 267) That “heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength” means the circulation of life of everything in the universe in the manner of perpetual thriving, or the vigorous process of nature; the superior man follows such spirit of the continuity of being, fashions his own existence in this way, and is thus full of strength and vitality and nerves himself to ceaseless activity; such strength and vitality are even not limited to himself but are to be continued and advanced by his numerous offspring as a spirit of life that overcomes the finiteness of life. In this respect, Chinese culture resembles Jewish culture significantly. Levinas criticizes Heidegger’s view of death and constructs the existential structure based on *eros* in the tradition of “love overcomes death” in the Hebrew Bible; he even claims that the future is the possibility of having a son. (*Totality and Infinity*, 266)

Since life is not born *ex nihilo*, the state of loneliness, hesitation and helplessness of *Dasein* does not sound familiar to people in the cultural tradition of China. In the massive flow of life embodied by perpetual thriving, the infinity of life presents itself. While death shows the finiteness of being with regard to individual life, the life phenomena of perpetual thriving indicate that the backdrop of existence is not the darkness of nothing but rather something fertile. The birth of life may be accidental for the individual, but with reference to the stream of life, it is the demand of life as such; the birth of *Dasein* is accordingly not its thrownness but the commitment to life as such. Ever since its birth, every life has its parents, which from the very beginning engenders the feeling of “at home” in the vast universe. The birth of individual life is encompassed in the continuum of life. In the cultural tradition of China, therefore, “family” means “regeneration,” which is generational continuity that conveys the continuation of life. In a fundamental sense, family has an ontological status instead of being a mode on the ontic level; family is hence in no way a mere form of social organization or valuable merely in everyday life; it is the bearer and protector of the infinite continuity of life. Love for kin or *qinqin* that is particularly stressed in the cultural tradition of China since the Zhou dynasty also relies on this. It is indeed conceivable that an existential structure quite distinct from Heidegger’s version can be formulated if we understand human life on the basis of the continuity of life.

The being of *Dasein* is not isolated in any case in the existential structure of perpetual thriving. The individual’s existence is not thrown blindly, in the state of uncanniness; rather, everyone is born of his parents. The cultural tradition of China emphasizes very much that “Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents,” (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 105) or that “The body is that which has been transmitted to us by our parents”(*The Li Ki*), which express continuity in the existentialist sense. The Chinese character for the self, *shen*, even has an original meaning of pregnancy: it resembles an expanding abdomen and suggests one or more children therein. This demonstrates from a primordial perspective that the understanding of the self

is not individualistic and that the individual's subsistence is not the free collision between individual wills and the full satisfaction of individual desires but resides from the very beginning in some kind of family. In this sense, the *Da* of Heideggerian *Dasein* bears a strong primordial sense of attachment and points to a locus of residence. In their translation of the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the American scholars Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames articulated specifically the authentic status of family in relation to man: "the life of almost every human being is played out within the context of his or her particular family, for better or for worse...the basic unit of humanity is this person in this family, rather than the solitary individual or the equally abstract notion of family" (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 11) Family is by no means an abstract form of social organization.

As for the understanding of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world, it is to Heidegger's great credit that *Dasein* in his philosophy discloses itself to itself by means of its state-of-mood or its immediate feeling in its immediate milieu. Heidegger thus breaks through at one stroke the philosophical orientation of modern Western philosophy that puts epistemology on the throne, and draws philosophy toward the existentialist plane with reference to state-of-mood. Therefore, such immediate feelings are for Heidegger not ontologically irrelevant but basic existential moments of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is always in some mood, and it is therein that *Dasein* is attuned to its world. Here one should particularly note that a mood unfolds being-in-the-world as a whole rather than being man's inner psychological activity. Heidegger thus analyzes a series of modes of state-of-mind. Among his famous analyses of fear, care, anxiety, and so on, which serve to unfold the existential moments of *Dasein*, the account of anxiety is most prominent. Such anxiety is not about some specific affair but pulls *Dasein* back from the world, throws it into a kind of anxiety about itself, and on that basis opens up its ownmost being. It is revealed through anxiety that *Dasein* is anxious about the thrownness of its existence into the world, which is an experience of elusiveness and uncertainty and shows the existentialist anxiety about the whole. Is this not actually the anxiety about the break of the stream of life?

By contrast, when one has a lucid appreciation of the continuity of life, what Heidegger calls state-of-mind will turn into a kind of enjoyment or *le* of life that settles the course of existence in a mood of enjoyment. For the Foolish Old Man, the individual has its own origin in the vast universe and is fully aware of its final end, so everything conforms to nature; the Foolish Old Man is always in an optimistic mood. The existentialist origin of such enjoyment is lucidity or *da*, which is clarity and transparency as opposed to anxiety. Enjoyment is thus lucidity based on the thorough comprehension of everything between heaven and earth that moves together with the sun and the moon. As is said by Confucius, "In all (the processes taking place) under heaven, what is there of thinking? what is there of anxious scheming? They all come to the same (successful) issue, though by different paths; there is one result, though there might be a hundred anxious schemes. What is there of thinking? what is there of anxious scheming? The sun goes and the moon comes; the moon goes and the sun comes;—the sun and moon thus take the place each of the other, and their shining

is the result. The cold goes and the heat comes; the heat goes and the cold comes;—it is by this mutual succession of the cold and heat that the year is completed.”(*The I Ching*, 389) Confucius’s discussion of “what is there of thinking? what is there of anxious scheming?” shows a kind of optimism in the midst of the changing of heaven and earth. Faced with the motion of heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, and the succession of the cold and heat, life nerves itself to ceaseless activity—this is precisely the ontological ground of the optimistic existentialist state-of-mood in the cultural tradition of China. Confucius is therefore enabled to say calmly that “You do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death?” (*Confucius Analects*, 115) and to demonstrate the attitude of the enjoyment of life.

The concept of enjoyment is very important in Chinese philosophy. Since it is said that “Living in a narrow alley, subsisting on a basket of grain and gourd full of water—other people could not have born such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui’s joy,”(*Confucius Analects*, 56) such enjoyment has nothing to do with our wealth and pleasure in everyday life. So it is the enjoyment of what? There is much discussion about this in neo-Confucianism from the Song dynasty to the Ming, which keenly grasps the importance of Confucius’s and Yan Hui’s enjoyment. To use Heidegger’s terminology, Confucius’s and Yan Hui’s enjoyment has nothing to do with specific beings, nor is it the enjoyment after achieving the way or *dao*; Cheng Yi says that “if Yan took the way to be enjoyable and then enjoyed it, he would not be Yan.” Enjoyment here is the fundamental satisfaction of existence as such. According to Zhu Xi’s interpretation, Yan Hui “originally has enjoyment”; here “originally” points to its existentialist ground and its primordial nature in the existentialist sense. Such enjoyment originates from the fundamental satisfaction of rich life and is the fundamental mood based on the comprehension of perpetual thriving of life instead of the anxiety about the uncertainty of existence. It is in this sense that scholars often claim that enjoyment in the cultural tradition of China contains a transcendent and religious dimension.

The optimistic attitude to life in the cultural tradition of China is perceived by many wise people. Liang Shuming says that there is a harmonious atmosphere in life of those who are virtuous or *ren*, and such feeling of harmony and enjoyment arises from the depth of life. The attitude to life resulting from this therefore renders everyday existence full of enjoyment, no matter it is in motion or at rest. Lin Yutang states that “the end of human life does not consist in life after death. For the ideal taught in Christianity, namely to exist in order to sacrifice, is inconceivable; ... The true end of human life consists in the pleasure of plain life by virtue of having enjoyment from heaven and knowing its dictates.” This is the satisfaction of, gratitude to and mirth of life that are experienced in the warm house of being. Li Zehou further formulates this as the “culture of the sense of enjoyment” in China. It follows from this that such sense of enjoyment is not merely an attitude to life but has a deep existentialist ground.

3. The ethical orientation of existentialism

Since existence is for Heidegger authentic only within its ownmost relationship, he proposes the concept of conscience, which is nevertheless merely an empty call that serves as, as he emphasizes, the existentialist ground of all possible ethical thoughts; as is known to all, however, the problem of ethics in Heidegger's existentialist thought always draws much attention and is indeed an almost irresolvable issue for Heidegger. For his conception of *Dasein* is utterly individualistic, and *Dasein*'s being with others in everyday life is interpreted as a kind of inauthentic life. The reason for this is none other than that he understands *Dasein*'s existence in relation to the break of life, to the individual. Since *Dasein* in its authentic state is isolated from others, conscience cannot but wander around *Dasein*'s authentic and inauthentic existence, and thus *Dasein* is both the called and the caller. Conscience nevertheless does not merely reside in *Dasein* itself, but Heidegger's explication of this amounts to a mystical imaginary space.

The existential structure of perpetual thriving, however, discloses the fundamental understanding of the origin of ethics in the cultural tradition of China and embodies the transcendent dimension in that tradition. The continuation of life and the nurture of offspring are natural instincts of life shared by man and animals. What, then, is the fundamental distinction between man and animals? Mencius says that "That whereby man differs from the lower animals is but small." (*The Works of Mencius*) What is this small difference? It is the root of culture developed in opposition to animal instincts. While the cultural tradition of the West transcends the animal, actualizes this small difference by means of God, what is stressed in that of China is the gratitude to the birth of life that is mainly embodied by the filial thought for parents and ancestors. It is chanted in the *Classic of Poetry*, the earliest self-understanding of our ancients, that "O my father, who beg at me! / O my mother, who nourished me! / Ye indulged me, ye fed me, / Ye held me up, ye supported me, / Ye looked after me, ye never left me, / Out and in ye bore me in your arms. / If I would return your kindness, / It is like great Heaven, illimitable." (*The She King*) This is the plainest and most fundamental expression of the filial thought: the debt children owe to their parents for fostering their life is as vast and boundless as the blue sky, and they also repay their parents in a limitless way. The filial thought implies the gratitude and reward for the birth and growth of life; considering such reverence for the continuation of life, the most serious violation of filial piety is to cut off the sacrifice for one's own ancestors. Mencius therefore says that "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them." (*The Works of Mencius*) This does not simply show his concern about reproduction but spells out the existential demand of perpetual thriving. The gratitude to the birth of life and the warning to later offspring are here totally consistent.

In the existential structure of perpetual thriving, the filial thought enables *Dasein* to jump out of the individuality of its life in the nearest way and to establish with the nearest others the relationship of love for kin that involves "Kindness on the part of the father, and filial duty on that of the son;

gentleness on the part of the elder brother, and obedience on that of the younger” (*The Li Ki*), in which filial duty is most crucial. Filial duty represents the reward for life in the most immediately way; the reminiscence about and the veneration of ancestors deriving from this parallels the worship of God in the cultural tradition of the West. The Chinese rites controversy after Matteo Ricci makes people regret the Pope’s crude prohibitions that sever the communication between the Eastern and the Western thoughts, but actually both the Pope and the Kangxi Emperor are well aware of their respective reasons. That ancestors are comparable to God in Chinese culture is absolutely unacceptable for the Catholic Church. As is said in the *Classic of Rites*, “All things originate from Heaven; man originates from his (great) ancestor. This is the reason why *Ji* was associated with God (at this sacrifice). In the sacrifices at the border there was an expression of gratitude to the source (of their prosperity) and a going back in their thoughts to the beginning of (all being).” (*The Li Ki*) This is the core idea in the cultural tradition of China established since the passage from the Yin dynasty to the Zhou. Ancestors therefore not only bear a biological and genealogical meaning but are a conception of values and the pivot whereby the individual transcends itself. Confucianism knows the connection therein so well that Zengzi says that “Take great care in seeing off the deceased and sedulously maintain the sacrifices to your distant ancestors, and the common people will sincerely return to Virtue.” (*Confucius Analects*, 4) Through the retrospection of the origin of life, one thinks of the meaning of human life and transcends the self, so that the social *ethos* appears sincere.

The basic hallmark of morality is care for collective interests or the transcendence over individual interests. In the cultural tradition of the West, it is God’s guarantee for eternal life that mediates the overcome of the individual’s self-centeredness and private desires. According to Jesus, the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to love thy neighbor as thyself—this is Jesus’s basic summary of the law of Moses. (*Matthew*, 22:36–40) There is in ancient China the Mohist thought about impartial love or *jian’ai*—“loving others as one’s self” (*The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*)—which is virtually a simple translation of “love thy neighbor as thyself.” This tradition of thought, however, fails to be passed down in Chinese culture. Why? Is this because Chinese do not see the good of “love thy neighbor as thyself?” If they see it, why do Confucians still attack it violently? And why is it not able to be passed down in China? The comparison with Christianity shows that, behind “love thy neighbor as thyself” in Christianity, there is a greater commandment, namely to love God. Many theologians point out that it is precisely through love for the neighbor that mankind expresses its love for God; that is to say, in order for us to go beyond self-centered needs and interests and to achieve the moral effect of loving the neighbor, God or His guarantee for eternal life is a necessary premise. The Mohist thought about impartial love obviously lacks the assurance from God. When Kant attempts to establish autonomy within his moral philosophy itself, the ultimate perfection of both happiness and virtue still depends on the postulate of the Idea of God. My love for others is at the same time love for God. The guarantee for eternal life here remains the fundamental cornerstone in the encounter with others. I must believe in God in

order to enjoy eternal life, and God asks me to love my neighbor as myself—this is the existentialist generative mechanism of morality in the tradition of Christianity: to surmount the self and achieve morality on the premise of God in the individual's eternal life.

In contrast to both “love thy neighbor as thyself” in Christianity and impartial love in Mohism, the great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining of life in the existentialist picture of perpetual thriving in the cultural tradition of China. Therefore, the being of life first expresses its gratitude to birth of its own life, and filial piety deriving from this plays a foundational role in moral life in the cultural tradition of China. Previous discussions of filial piety often cling too much to the concrete practices in history, that is, the institutional forms and expressions of this core idea of value in old times such as the instructions on giving birth and fostering, death and burial, the sacrificial ceremony, and children's mourning. From the fundamental perspective, however, filial piety children show toward their parents embodies the gratitude to the birth of life, the reward for the giving birth and fostering by their parents, and the veneration of the great attribute of heaven and earth, namely the giving and maintaining of life. The idea of filial piety has a profound existentialist ground; it is through the mechanism of filial piety that man is elevated from self-centeredness in the nearest way, transcends the self by means of gratitude to life, and loves the nearest persons, namely his parents. As the Chinese saying goes, “filial piety tops all virtues;” Max Weber, who recognizes this very well, states that “filial piety [is] the virtue from which all others issue,” (*The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 158) which is a translation of Confucius's words “filial piety is the beginning of virtue.” Filial piety acts as the starting point and foundation of morality in the cultural tradition of China, and the traditional moral system centered on benevolence or *ren'ai* is the elevation and extension of the existentialist ground of filial piety. It is on the basis of filial piety and respect for elders that Confucius develops the concept of benevolence, which is a more extensive and philosophical formulation than love for kin and the filial thought. Nevertheless, the system of benevolence set forth by Confucius is still rooted in filial piety and respect for elders, and Youzi has a deep comprehension of the essence of Confucius's thought about benevolence: “Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?” (*Confucius Analects*, 1) Mencius articulates this point more clearly by regarding *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* as all related to filial piety: “The richest fruit of benevolence is this: the service of one's parents. The richest fruit of righteousness is this: the obeying one's elder brothers. The richest fruit of wisdom is this: the knowing those two things, and not departing from them. The richest fruit of propriety is this: the ordering and adorning those two things.” (*The Works of Mencius*) Even in modern times, Liang Qichao makes an analogy between filial piety and the relationship between the collective and the self.

Benevolence is also a crucial concept in modern Western moral philosophy: it emerges from the fact that people gradually give up searching for the ground of morality in God and search for its source in the individual's finite life instead. Many philosophers such as Hume, Rousseau, Adam

Smith, and so on discuss this concept and try to found benevolence on compassion in order to address the question of how to surmount the self. However, they find that people's compassion or benevolence suffers from partiality, that is to say, people always love those who are close to them first, and then love their acquaintances, while love for strangers is weaker—this is exactly what Confucians call the gradations of love. Such phenomena of the gradations of love are an existentialist fact that both Eastern and Western philosophers recognize and because of which Confucians reject impartial love. Nevertheless, the existence of society indeed relies on some basic cohesion, some values of love for all lives. Eastern and Western philosophers have totally different solutions to this. Hume sees the limitations of benevolence due to its partiality and gradations, especially its narrow-mindedness in broader society; he hence proposes the concept of artificial virtue, which is a remedial measure that is to make up the flaws of benevolence by virtue of the idea of justice premised on equality of all mankind. In a sense, this step always goes beyond the fields of morality and ethics and enters those of politics and law.

In contrast to Hume, who remedies the gradations and limitations of benevolence by virtue of justice, the cultural tradition of China puts greater emphasis on the development of the most primordial filial love into more extensive benevolence, and ultimately into the thought that “the virtuous man holds everything between heaven and earth to be one.” Filial piety is the first step of the actualization of benevolence; through the effort of extrapolating from oneself to others or *tuijijiren*, such love expands in *Bildung* and becomes “general care for the masses” (*Confucius Analects*, 3) or for all mankind extensively. Yu Ying-shih says that “in terms of the values of culture, China and the West have their respective highest universal principles applicable to every individual. In the West this can be represented by justice, and in China the concept of *ren*.” Justice and benevolence, albeit leading to the divergence between China and the West, actually address the same existentialist phenomena in terms of their origin, namely the gradations of love; but they choose different paths in terms of the solution. On the basis of the idea of equality of all mankind, the West uses artificial calculable justice such as communicative and distributive justice to solve the problem of the gradations of benevolence, and thus stresses very much the role of law; the cultural tradition of China emphasizes benevolence instead, takes as the root the dictate that man “should be filial when at home and respectful of his elders when in public,” (*Confucius Analects*, 3) and overcomes the initial limitations and gradations of benevolence by means of extrapolation—this root is the very starting point of the extrapolation from oneself to others, of “Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated.” (*The Works of Mencius*) Extrapolation is an important concept in Confucianism and is not enforced through legal justice but is cultivated through *Bildung*. It is therefore said in the *Classic of Filial Piety* that superior men's “teaching of family reverence is their way of showing respect (*jing*) for every father in the empire; their teaching of fraternal deference (*ti*) is their way of showing respect for every elder brother in the

empire.”(*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 113) It follows that filial piety based on the existentialist foundation of thriving is not only gratitude to and love for one’s own parents but a fundamental generative mechanism of morality and, by means of the *Bildung* effect of extrapolation, turns into a universal moral awareness that one should display a general care for the masses, regard common people as brethren and things as companions. This generative structure of morality is totally consistent with the understanding of life in terms of thriving; according to Prof. Chen Lai’s interpretation, Zhu Xi derives from this that “*ren* is the essence of thriving.”

In Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, however, ethics bears no primal significance and individualistic *Dasein* also does not know at all the basis for transcending self-centeredness, so he cannot but appeal to the empty call of conscience, a voice that summons *Dasein* in the inauthentic state back to the authentic state. Thus, conscience by no means calls the self to get out of itself and to encounter others, but calls *Dasein* to come back to itself from the midst of *das Man*. The call of conscience appears to ask us to confront the authentic self, but it cannot provide us with a better form of practice. More crucially, who is the caller exactly? Heidegger can only say that “The call comes from me, and yet over me.”(*Being and Time*, 275) The problem of ethics is always a great puzzle in Heidegger’s philosophy. Indeed, this is precisely what we need to help Heidegger face up to: by virtue of his Jewish tradition, Levinas bravely proclaims “ethics as first philosophy”, thereby opposes Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, and clarifies the origin of ethics through the encounter with the Other. In the existential structure of perpetual thriving, filial piety as the fundamental ethical experience provides another interpretative possibility of elaborating ethics as first philosophy in the cultural tradition of China. It is necessary for us to examine and criticize Heidegger’s philosophy with reference to our own cultural tradition. If we do not bear in mind the essence of our own cultural tradition, our encounter with Western thoughts, modern thoughts, or Heidegger’s philosophy will generate myriads of obstacles to the recognition of our own life. If, however, we are filled with the understanding and affirmation of the value of our own life, theoretical blind spots in Heidegger or other Western philosophers will have nowhere to hide.

The existential structure of perpetual thriving also has a deep influence on politics. Suffice it to mention the controversy over the concealment of kin’s affairs in Chinese academia in recent years. Does the idea of love for kin based on the existential structure of thriving conflict with modern politics? Does it violate the notion of the modern citizen? We should first take a look at the picture of modern politics. In modern political philosophy established by Hobbes, the greatest importance is bestowed on the individual; in order to preserve life and avoid violent death caused by free collisions between individuals, they decide to give up some of their natural rights and to create the state in a contractual way to protect them. Therefore, the state is essentially a creation for the sake of protecting the individual. The logic implicit in this mechanism of subjection-protection is the preservation of individual life. Hobbes then concludes that, in the court of the state, the individual has no duty to expose himself and has the right to stay silent. This is the philosophical ground of

the defendant's right to stay silent in court. This issue is actually directly linked to the concealment of kin's affairs, for to stay silent can be interpreted as a kind of self-concealment. In the cultural tradition of China, the natural bond between father and son is indeed the crucial cornerstone of moral *Bildung*, and Confucius particularly designs the delicate mechanism of concealment to deal with the challenge of such extreme situations in court. People can of course appeal to various arguments according to the traditional doctrine and quote the classics in order to justify the concealment of kin's affairs. Here we attempt to approach this question from a new perspective: if we grant that the fundamental unit of life is not only the individual but the continuity of life, Hobbes's argument for the individual's right to stay silent (to self-conceal) can also be smoothly transformed into an argument for the concealment of kin's affairs. Since people have no duty to expose their own crime to the state according to their initial motive for entering political society, they also have no reason to expose their own kin, with whom they form a continuum of life. It is then clear that the concealment of kin's affairs based on the existentialist foundation of thriving does not infringe the structure of modern politics. As a matter of fact, this is not something impractical in legal terms because the law of Taiwan gives parents, children, and close relatives the right to refuse to testify in court. This exemplifies the conformity of modern society to the existential structure in the cultural tradition of China.

4. The existential-historical implication of learning and teaching

There is between parents and children a deep connection between lives in the existential structure of perpetual thriving that needs elaborating in an existentialist way. This is originally a weak link in the cultural tradition of the West and is further weakened in modern thoughts that consolidate the individual. For John Locke, children are created by God, so parents' raising children only counts as fulfilling their obligation to God and the relationship between parents and children is no more than a legal and contractual one—they are essentially mutually independent individuals. A natural continuum of life is sliced alive by the awareness of God and the law. In Heidegger's account, it is also improbable that such continuity of life could be integrated into his system, for his existentialist analysis involves absolutely no understanding of such continuity, and the generation has no place in that analysis.

In addition to the moment of filial piety in the relationship between parents and children, the cultural tradition of China pays particular attention to learning and teaching on the basis of the existential structure of perpetual thriving. The emphasis on the continuum of life is not only embodied by the continuation of the species in the biological sense, but informs the cultural paradigm based on this existentialist position. The vital role learning and teaching play in the cultural tradition of China testifies to this. The opening part of the *Analects* is "Learning," and Confucius leaves abundant accounts of learning. According to Zhu Xi's interpretation in his *Collected Commentaries on the Analects*, "to say 'learning' is to say 'emulating,'" or the original

meaning of learning is emulating. What, then, is it that is to be emulated? The object of emulation is predecessors' experience of life that is transferred into current life by means of learning and emulating in the long river of life that thrives perpetually. "Learning' means the acquisition and possession of the meaning predecessors invest in the cultural tradition. A community can thus possess a common world in which all members affect, contact and communicate with each other on the basis of learning." Learning is therefore emulating and learning predecessors' experience, and the emphasis is put on the ancient cultural tradition in Confucius's time, which is the reason why Confucius speaks about "broadly learned with regard to culture." (*Confucius Analects*, 62) In the picture depicted by Heidegger, however, *Dasein* exists solitarily in the world despite that *Dasein*'s curiosity often makes it fall prey to the world of *das Man*. Heidegger also spends numerous pages accounting for having-been, *Dasein*'s having-been-there, and its influence on a specific world; but he fails to take into account how *Dasein* that has been there has an effect on the current world through the existentialist micro-mechanism of learning—for him, learning has no existentialist status.

In relation to learning there is also teaching. "Teaching" is in Chinese cognate with "filial piety;" the former is intimately connected with the latter. *Shuowen* defines teaching as "what is exercised by the superior is emulated by the subordinate." It is thus clear that teaching is also grounded in the existential structure of perpetual thriving. The existential experience of generations can be passed down through the mechanism of learning and teaching, and the individual is not utterly solitary or absolutely free because others' existential experience is handed out to it in a primordial way through learning and teaching and becomes the support for its choices in the face of existence. The growth of the next generation has everything to do with the teaching of the previous generation. Confucius's self-assessment is exactly that "I learn without satiety, and teach without being tired." (*The Works of Mencius*) Teaching in the cultural tradition of China is first and foremost connected with filial piety. The *Classic of Filial Piety* opens with the statement that "It is family reverence (*xiao*)...that is the root of excellence, and whence education (*jiao*) itself is born." (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 105) Mencius also holds it necessary to teach common people to put filial piety and respect for elders above everything else: "Let careful attention be paid to education in schools, inculcating in it especially the filial and fraternal duties." (*The Works of Mencius*) The most immediate subject of teaching before its content develops more extensively is arguably an enlargement of filial affection; as is mentioned above, filial affection is natural, while extrapolation is not natural but the outcome of *Bildung*: "the process of education is most effectively accomplished through a process of modeling and emulation both within the family and within the polity." (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 72–73)

According to Heidegger's account, the concept of project is important in the structure of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world. *Dasein* as *Dasein* has always already projected its own existence and even projects itself existentially and authentically onto its being-toward-death. Nevertheless, the project

is always *Dasein*'s project, no matter it is authentic or not. In the cultural tradition of China, however, the project between generations is made possible through learning and teaching, which are also the extension of the project of life, that is, the project of individual *Dasein* is extended to that of the stream of life. The project is a crucial moment in the Heideggerian existential structure of being-toward-death: *Dasein* projects itself onto various possibilities of existence, but the self is the main concern despite that the grasp of the world related to its own existence is also taken into account. The project in the cultural tradition of China is not only *Dasein*'s project in this life but a project of the continuum of life that is mainly embodied by teaching. The subject of teaching is not merely filial piety but related to parents and children in the continuum of life; so it is said at the beginning of the *Three Character Classic*, a text for elementary education, that "To feed without teaching / is the father's fault," (*San Tzu Ching*)—such existential experience is clearly discernible in the cultural tradition of China.

While the Heideggerian project can only be an individualistic scheme and constrained by finite life, the project of life in the existential structure based on the cultural tradition of China has a different bearing. The story of the former US ambassador to China Gary Faye Locke, which is a great favorite of many, is often read as a story of his self-realization by means of US style personal strivings; from the perspective of the existential experience of China, however, his story does not start from himself but from his grandfather, who immigrates to the US and studies hard on English when working as a servant in a rich family. Although *Dasein* is a thrown project, as is stressed by Heidegger, the project is actually constrained; nevertheless, this constraint can be understood in a more positive way. The emphasis the cultural tradition of China puts on teaching constitutes a prerequisite for *Dasein*'s project. Teaching is not only about knowledge but about how to mature, which is also a central moment of the existentialist mechanism of perpetual thriving. Regarding the example of Gary Locke, the point is not that his achievement is his grandfather's project, but that the individual's projective act in this cultural tradition is not only ownmost but related to the family, which is the nearest being-with-others; in fact, it is only through others that *Dasein* is able to find some specific way of being in its own project—such relationship of dependence determines that *Dasein*'s project is not independent. Therefore, there are natural places for learning and teaching in the existential structure of thriving, which show exactly the previous generation's care for its specific other, namely the next generation. In this structural relationship, the teacher who embodies teaching occupies a special position in the cultural tradition of China: he is always linked with father, and many popular memorial tablets put together heaven, earth, emperor, parent, and teacher. As the practitioner of teaching and the example for learners, teacher plays an essential role for the continuation of life and culture. The point here is not about the concrete subject of teaching but that teaching and learning should become a moment of the existential structure. If we understand the existential structure not only in terms of the break of life but also in terms of the continuity of life, teaching and learning as a kind of project toward the future can be connected with the Heideggerian account.

Since the existential structure of perpetual striving links people's awareness of life by means of filial piety and informs cultural inheritance through teaching-learning, it entails in cultural terms the historical-cultural phenomenon of "striving to preserve and prolong culture in order to carry on ancestors' unfulfilled wishes and to secure the longevity of cultural history," from which derives the strong awareness of cultural inheritance in the cultural tradition of China. History not only consists of past facts but enters the present immediately through learning and teaching; the existential orientation of thriving is not only toward the past but also toward the future. The understanding of infinite life resulting from the reminiscence about ancestors and the hope placed on numerous offspring engenders in the cultural tradition of China the cultural awareness of "linking with thousands of years in the past and thousands of generations in the future," or backward retrospection and forward bequest. As is said in the *Classic of Poetry*, "For such filial piety, without ceasing, / There will ever be conferred blessing on you." (*The She King*) The filial son who continues his parents' life and the tradition that values teaching-learning are the fundamental reason for the immortality and indestructibility of culture.

According to Rousseau, it is distinctive of man that he is perfectible—not only perfectible on the level of individual life but on the level of the species. Rousseau, however, gives no further account of how mankind as a species can advance its perfection on the universal scale. The *Doctrine of the Mean* gives the answer in connection with the notion of filial piety: "Now filial piety is seen in the skillful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skillful carrying forward of their undertakings." (*The Li Ki*) This is even called a kind of far extending filial piety that is not merely gratitude to life but, as is said in the *Classic of Filial Piety*, "distinguishing yourself and walking the proper way (*dao*) in the world; raising your name high for posterity and thereby bringing esteem to your father and mother—it is in these things that family reverence finds its consummation." (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 105) Far extending filial piety is in truth to carry on predecessors' wishes and to strive to accomplish them. Who conforms to such far extending filial piety? The examples in history are King Wu of Zhou and the Duke of Zhou, who manage to carry on King Wen's wish and accomplish his unfinished project. That is to say, the individual's final achievement not only appears as the realization of individualistic values but belongs to the massive flow of history that thrives perpetually. This is also an essential feature of filial piety that is directly related to historical development and points to the future. Indeed, such idea of continual progress is deeply rooted in people's hearts in the modern era, but the cultural tradition of the West the archetype of which is Christianity presupposes certain ultimate goal of such progressive history, namely the Last Judgment, the end of history, or communist society, in order to demonstrate its final perfection. In the existential structure distinctive of China, although there is an effective micro-mechanism of the perfection of civilization, there is no end of perfection. The infinity of life based on thriving is echoed in *Zhouyi* by the last two of the 64 hexagrams: *Ki Ji* and *Wei Ji* or Already and Not-yet. Surprisingly, the last hexagram here is not

Already, which is similar to the Hegelian Absolute and denotes the achievement of everything and the final actualization of man's perfection, but Not-yet, which means that one is still not successful and must begin anew. Not-yet as the last hexagram bears great significance: it not only contains the basic meaning of perpetual thriving but also implies in terms of the existential structure the structure of continual development as well as various possibilities of development.

In fact, the existential structure of perpetual thriving does not contradict *Dasein*'s individual existence. Respect for the cultural tradition of love for kin by no means prevents us from prizing every node in the continuum of life and valuing every individual. As the rich fruit borne in the continuum of life, every life is most precious. The stream of life can embrace every node or every individual; such existential structure is also not meant to negate freedom brought about by the existential structure of *Dasein*'s being-toward-death. Individualistic existential structure is nevertheless prone to lose the dimension of the continuity of life, which is precisely the existential ground of articulating the origin of man's responsibility. Heidegger's philosophy lacks the ethical orientation and solely concentrates on the individual self, which is far from adequate. While the dimension unfolded by the continuity of life cannot be integrated into the Heideggerian existential structure, the integration is plausible the other way around, that is, the structure of the continuity of life can well contain the being of every individual *Dasein*. As different representatives of human civilization, Western and Chinese cultures articulate their respective existential structures from different aspects. These existential structures reveal the mechanism of the diversity in human civilization and wisdom, and disclose the primal principles of ethics they provide respectively.

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