THE SEARCH FOR A UNIVERSAL STANDARD OF MORALITY: FILIAL PIETY AND ITS CHINESE EXPERIENCE

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In order to search for a practical universal moral standard, it is necessary to define what morality is first. On anthropomorphic grounds, morality may be defined as the fundamental human behavior that ensures the sustainability, enjoyment and fulfillment of the meaning of life. What life is for a human being is certainly not merely to be alive as it is for most other living things in the world. Therefore, we may venture to say to be human means to be moral. Without it, human beings may not have survived, let alone have attained the development civilizations have achieved. Yet, in spite of the enormous achievements made through human cognition to acquire the most reliable knowledge in science, there is still no absolute explanation of how and why life originated from the Big Bang and how life emerged from the lifeless fundamental particles of quarks and leptons. Neuro science remains uncertain how human consciousness let alone the human conscience arise from the brain’s neural structures and functions. History tells us even scientific knowledge is provisional. Thus, the contention persists that an external creator created this world and that human life on earth came as a redemption.

However, putting aside these profound questions such as how human life originated, Mencius (381–289 B.C.), considered the second sage of Confucianism after Confucius, pointed out what it is to be human. For example, as a result of human instinct, if one saw a child about to fall into a well, one would rush to the rescue without considering the danger to oneself or expecting the gratitude of the child’s parents or to become a hero in the community. This instantaneous response, in Mencius’ view, constitutes the essence of human morality. He extends this sense of commiseration to a sense of shame, a sense of propriety, and a sense of right and wrong as attributes to all. Mencius may have been overly optimistic and simplistic in his contention that a sense of morality reflects the ultimate goodness of human nature. But, there seems to be no indication that the process of evolution, either through the survival of the fittest or the busiest, has altered much about what Mencius prescribed. It was

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reported that Robert Oppenheimer, the chief architect of the nuclear bomb quoted the saying in Sanskrit, “Am I the destroyer of the world?” when he saw the mushroom cloud rising from the first nuclear explosion at the Los Alamos test site in 1945. Countless instances of what Mencius contended have occurred throughout history all over the world, despite the horrors of warfare, genocides, natural and human-made disasters and diseases. For instance, in Palm Beach, Florida, a 70-year-old man recently dashed into the surf to pull a boy from an approaching shark. The greatest surprise of all was this gentleman did not know how to swim and was afraid of the water. He was on his regular mail delivery route when he said, “I felt like I was looking at my own mother ..., my heart just went out to them.” (Sun Sentinel)

The manifestations of one’s sense of morality involve the interaction of human relations, which is predicated on the survival of the human species as a whole. The survival of the human species depends on the survival of each individual human being. The survival of an individual human being depends on reproduction, which requires a harmonious interaction between the opposite sexes to produce an offspring. The human species’ life process proceeds in a twofold structure of male and female interaction in complementary contradiction. It is difficult to explain why. The very fact is that no individual can reproduce by itself no matter how fit or successful it is. You can clone anyone you like but you cannot clone by yourself. Interdependence in harmonious balance between individuals and among the whole is the first key to survival. Demographic studies show that an imbalance between the male and female population would endanger the survivability of the human species. As an individual, no one likes to die but one cannot avoid it. One must accept the fact that a relative balance has prevailed in the horizontal distribution of the opposite sexes as well as in the vertical succession of life and death cycles as a whole to ensure the survival and longevity in the evolutionary process of the human species. How this blessed balance occurs and benefits the survival of the human species needs further exploration. The principle of harmonious balance seems indispensable to evolution.

Taking the illustration one step further, the survival of an individual body depends mainly on a twofold structure of actions, eating and mating. Each of the processes reiterates itself in a twofold structure through a cyclical progression. The feeling of hunger manifests itself in eating and is counterbalanced by fullness, which eliminates the feeling of hunger. Arousal and mating follows a similar satiation and cyclical counterbalanc-