

CHAPTER 10

The Ethics of Contingency

Yinyang

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IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND how Confucian culture is relevant to a changing world cultural order, we must allow this tradition to speak on its own terms. That is, we must appeal to its own philosophical vocabulary. The language of yinyang is pervasive in Confucian philosophy, from the *Yijing* in classical times down to the contemporary New Confucianism. What I want to do in this chapter is to bring clarity to this central idea, and then explore its philosophical implications and cultural expressions. The ethics of contingency that I try to draw from the doctrine of yinyang would be of significance especially in the age of contingency that we are living in.

The concept of yinyang in the East Asian philosophical context has worked as a core idea that explains changes, harmony, and unity in both the universe and the human world. Originally, yin and yang were two words referring, respectively, to the dark and to the light. Yin indicated the phenomenon of a cloud blocking the sun and yang that of the sun shining. But later they were combined to mean a complex quality (a pair of opposites) or function (a dialectical movement) of things or phenomena that displayed a dynamic feature of the world.

The concept of yinyang as a dialectical principle or as Dao is most perspicuously present in the *Yijing* 易經, or *Book of Changes*, which has had tremendous influence on Confucianism, ancient and modern. Even though “yinyang” is found in Daoist philosophy, the *Laozi*, and the *Zhuangzi*, but not in the four cardinal Confucian books (*Si shu* 四書), the Confucian metaphysics

and cosmology developed in the Song dynasty cannot be discussed without it. Its influence on Confucian culture in general is even greater. The concept of yinyang, connected with that of the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行) of Fire, Water, Wood, Metal, and Earth, has exercised great explanatory power in China since the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) and was widely used among Han Confucians, especially by Dong Zhongshu, for political purposes. Since Song Neo-Confucianism developed a unique worldview by fully exploiting the *Yijing*, the doctrine of yinyang and *wuxing* has constituted a basic Confucian philosophical framework within which natural phenomena and human affairs could be explained. Its influence in Confucian culture is so extensive that we cannot fully understand its nature without recourse to it. In particular, the concept of yinyang defines a special aspect of Confucian reasoning: it is the ability to balance between two conflicting opposites through ways that are quite different from other ordinary ways of reaching equilibrium and from the way that Western dialectical reason works.

As the explanatory force of yinyang has been enormous, the range of its use has been wide to the extent that it has covered the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and ethics as denominated by the discipline of Western philosophy. The main reason for yinyang having such diverse and widespread use is that the history of its use is long and complex, generating multiple layers of meaning.

Risking oversimplification, I want to divide these layers into three categories.

1. Yinyang as *substances*. In a Neo-Confucian context, it is used to indicate two modes of *qi* 氣. It is also not unusual to find contexts where yinyang refers to people or entities like male and female and heaven and earth.
2. Yinyang as the *properties of things*. It also refers to such properties of things as dark-light, soft-hard, feminine-masculine, and low-high.
3. Yinyang as a *principle of signification*. This refers to a function that generates contrasts and differences or a principle that makes changes in the world.¹

For all of these equivocations, there is one essential aspect of yinyang: it is always concerned with the cyclic relation and the changing movement between contraries or opposites. They keep rotating without cessation. It is the *way* (*dao* 道) in which there is an eternal movement where yin follows yang and yang follows yin, as in the movement of bending and expanding, and in the change of day and night. This relation includes interdependence, in which opposites are interfused and intermingled so that they cannot exist on their own even though they keep their own identities in the sense that one cannot be reduced to the other or be defined by the other. The exact nature of the relation, however, can-

not be manifested in clear terms or concepts. In the appended remarks of the *Book of Changes*, we find this passage: “The unfathomable in the operation of yin and yang is called spirit (*shen* 神).”² Throughout the history of the development of Confucianism, we may find different types of yinyang relations: (1) There is yinyang as a *successive* relation, where a yin phase follows a yang phase as in an ebb and flow. (2) There is yinyang as a *simultaneous* relation, where yin grows and yang shrinks simultaneously. In this type, yin and yang always come together, overlap, and interpenetrate. And (3) there is yinyang as a *stimulus-response* relation in order to make a unified whole. My concern in this chapter is to think about the ethical implication of the principle of yinyang characterized in type 2.

The Superposition of Yinyang and Its Moral Implications

The *Book of Changes* consists of judgments and comments on sixty-four symbolic hexagrams, each consisting of double trigrams, and each one of these in turn consisting of eight trigrams having an iconic relation with an element of the universe. One of the governing concepts of the *Changes* is the intertwining of yinyang to the effect of yin existing in yang and yang in yin (陰陽錯綜). Here, Heaven (*qian* 乾), earth (*kun* 坤), water (*kan* 坎), fire (*li* 離), wind (*xun* 巽), thunder (*lei* 雷), mountain (*gen* 艮), and pond (*dui* 兌) are considered the basic elements of the universe. Each corresponds to a state of affairs or a quality such as being lofty, being low, being in adversity, being bright, bending, being in action, stopping, and being pleased. This accordingly yields various meanings piling up one upon another. A trigram consists of three lines, divided or undivided. The divided line represents yin and the undivided yang. The first, third, and fifth lines of a hexagram are considered to take yang positions, and the second, fourth, and sixth, yin positions. A divided yin line (*yinyao* 陰爻) may take either a yang or a yin position. In this way, yin and yang are always superposed in a hexagram yielding different judgments depending on the ways they are superposed.

The fact that opposites and contraries are always intertwined, interpenetrating, and interdependent has an ethical implication of great importance in the East Asian cultural context. There is nothing that is one hundred percent pure yang or pure yin. The hexagram *qian* 乾 consists of six yang lines representing the image of pure yang. But the second, fourth, and sixth lines are located in yin positions, which means that yang lines (*yangyao* 陽爻) are located in yin positions. There is yin force hidden even in *qian* as pure yang. Even when something looks like pure yang, it contains a moment that makes the transformation of it into the other phase possible. The negative moment penetrating into the purity of yang or yin is indispensable for a certain state of affairs to change into another phase. Everything categorized as yang or yin contains a moment of its

own negation within it to make the alternation possible. All things in the universe change through the alternation of opposing forces, yin and yang. Everything comes and goes in a cyclic order of the universe. When a state of affairs is such that a thing reaches the utmost limit of its development, it is doomed to change into the opposite state (i.e., its annihilation). On reaching the utmost limit, however, there is already inherent in the thing a seed of downfall at the moment of change. The sage is that person who can examine the subtle emergence of the moment and foresee the turning of one phase into the next. The moment is so subtle that ordinary men cannot recognize it. The ethics of yin-yang exhorts people to learn the wisdom of the sage who can see the phase of a thing within the process of its changes and thus within the totality of the vicissitudes of life. This is the way we understand *dao*.

A sage is a person who can see the superposition of yin and yang in all phenomena of the universe. By noticing a sign of fall in rising and a sign of rise in falling, for instance, a sage can see the superposition of fall and rise. All things appear in the twofold yin and yang. As there is neither pure yang nor pure yin, there is nothing that is absolutely good or evil in a moral context. Unlike the Western philosophical tradition, where one may find the concept of absolute substance, or the concept of the highest good (*summum bonum*), the Confucian tradition does away with the concept of absolute good and absolute evil. In the Christian tradition, evil has been posited as the other of the perfect good, God. Modern philosophers tend to internalize evil as something deeply rooted in human nature. Kant, for example, identified radical evil in human nature as the perversion of our will exposed in our desires and inclinations.³ The contemporary political philosopher Hannah Arendt observed in her early work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that radical evil is rooted in some original fault of human nature, even though she later claimed the banality of evil.⁴ But in the East Asian Confucian tradition, what counts as evil is the inappropriate manifestation of moral feelings and values. Even if the moral feelings represented in the four sprouts (*si duan* 四端) are themselves purely good, they tend toward being evil when not being properly utilized. Evil in this context does not have a radical feature of being deeply rooted in human nature. In the Confucian context, it is not the case that human feelings and desires are bad on their own account. Only when they run against the principle of the middle and the rules of propriety do they become evil. But how do we know the middle and what is proper in all the variety of human situations?

The Middle as Not Fixed, but Situated

The moral ideal in the ethics of yinyang is not the removal of the bad, as it is in Kantian ethics, where one's moral will is free of desires and inclinations that

follow the dictates of a practical reason that is absolutely independent of sense experience. As mentioned above, the *dao* that governs all the changes in the universe tells us that there is no eternal good or bad. Everything has its own limit containing the seed of its downfall. Thus, if you are experiencing bad fortune, then it means that good fortune will soon come. If you are on the apex, then you have to prepare yourself for the downward road. Even before you arrive at the highest point, you should already have prepared for the lowest, because the lowest is already present in the highest without being seen. By avoiding the ultimate and the final, you can control your desires at the proper level. You always have to stop before your desire is fully realized. Full realization or perfection is almost the same as excess and overflow. Being at the highest simply means being at the beginning of falling: the judgment on the top yang in the hexagram *Qian* runs, “‘A dragon that overreaches should have cause for regret’: when something is at the full, it cannot last long.”⁵ The position of a noble man is not the top, but right below the top (the fifth line).

The principle of the middle, in a Confucian context, tells us to avoid standing on two ultimate ends of a line in all human situations. To determine the middle, we have to examine closely the situation we are in. As everything constantly changes, there cannot be a fixed middle point where the balance between the two opposing forces, yin and yang, can be achieved. In accordance with the time and position in which one is located, one can determine where the middle point is. But it is not easily found. Nor can we depend on our intuition, as may be proposed in ethical intuitionism. There is no such thing as a moral intuition by which one knows the middle once and for all. Only the wisdom of a sage may let us know where the middle is. Wisdom is based on a deep reflection on human experience, helping us to attain a fine sensibility that enables us to be in tune with the needs of the time and space of a particular situation (*shizhong* 時中).

Let us think about the example in the *Mencius* (“Jin Xin I” 盡心章句上, 26) where the difficulty of taking the middle is mentioned. Taking the middle is different from holding just one middle point while disregarding a hundred others. It is rather like holding the whole by holding one point, the middle as the center point of weight.⁶

Cheng Yi, in his commentary to the *Mencius*, says that the middle is the most difficult concept to understand, and thus we dare not talk about it but rather try to grasp it in quiescence, utterly focused using our inner eye (*mo shi xin tong* 默識心通): “It is most difficult to understand the word *zhong* (中). Thus you should try to know it through your inner mind in silence.”⁷

The middle is always contextually determined depending on the perspective one takes. The wisdom of a sage is the wisdom that sees the balancing point in the fluctuation of things and the flexibility of truth in human affairs. But this wisdom is different from moral intuition, which is a priori given as the wisdom

learned through experience and through trial and error. Everything has its own middle. It is therefore impossible to grasp the middle in general, or the truth in all human affairs, as Cheng Yi tells us:

It is impossible to grasp the middle. If we knew the middle, then we would not have to wait to search for the middle in each case of human affairs and in every natural phenomenon. If there were a given middle, then it is not a real middle.⁸

To find the middle of something, we have to examine it in its particularity, that is, examine the specific situation within which it is located. The middle must be determined in each individual case. As a skilled surfer knows how to balance at every movement of the waves, so a sage knows how to be attuned to the needs of the times in human affairs. As every layperson can learn the skill of surfing only by participating in surfing, a common man learns the wisdom of the sage through experience. Learning involves knowing how and when to advance, to retreat, to preserve, to live, when to gain, and when to lose. Through regret and good fortune, one can learn lessons and come to know proper timing and the way to refrain from certain actions at inopportune times.

On the surface, Confucian ethics has much in common with moral intuitionism. The concepts of Mencius' four sprouts (*si duan*) and Wang Yangming's innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) are often considered to advocate innate or a priori moral knowledge. But I think rather that they represent a moral ability or disposition inherent in every human being. Moral knowledge in Confucian contexts always comes through constant learning and self-cultivation simulating the wisdom of a sage. It is not a priori or intuitively given but rather is to be searched in every moment of our experience by taking care of the moment. To attain moral wisdom, it is important to ride the change and transformation of affairs, trying to view matters in the totality of unending change. Is this kind of ethical position to be assimilated into a situation ethics? In what follows, I would like to argue that the ethics of yinyang is not a kind of situation ethics that may result in ethical relativism or ethical nihilism.

Keeping Desire Subdued through Concerned Consciousness

It is important to note that the yinyang ethics proposed in a Confucian context is not opportunistic, the strong emphasis on timing and the strong blame for inopportune choice of action notwithstanding. Situation ethics does not accept universal moral principles or values that may hold in every human situation. All moral judgments depend on the situation one is located in at the moment of action. In contrast, according to Kantian ethics, telling a lie is morally bad

in whatever situation one is placed. If everyone tells a lie, then a linguistic discourse itself, let alone the everyday communication among people, would not be possible. In Kantian ethics, a maxim cannot be a moral rule if it cannot pass the test of universality. Kant thought that the first core of morality is universality, which prescribes that we must all be the same human beings. When one tells a lie, therefore, one goes against the principle of humanity. Regardless of the situation, certain actions are not to be allowed.

But in the context of yinyang ethics, we cannot make a Kantian judgment on the act of telling a lie as such. In certain situations, the act could also be one of helping a dying person or saving another person's life. Moral goodness is not something inherent in actions and intentions. It can only be measured in the wider context of human actions. There is no fixed rule to define the scale of that context. It only depends on one's own moral sensibility finely developed through one's experience in society. This kind of contextual and situational attitude of yinyang ethics, however, does not result in ethical relativism because in all situations one should not take one's eyes off the *dao*, moral truth, and rectitude. In the ethics of yinyang, there is a strong belief in the way of things and the dictates of the inner nature of things. The indeterminacy of the middle only shows the subtlety of the way these dictates emerge.

Accepting the contingencies and vicissitudes of life does not necessarily lead one to a relativist attitude toward what is valuable and right. A relativist believes that there are many ways to be good or right and that it is not possible to determine one right way. But the moral attitude advocated in the *Book of Changes* is that of an inquirer ever searching at every turn of life for what is right and morally true. The truth is not of relative value. Even though the truth is not what we can easily find, being hidden in moving moments of time, it does exist. To find the truth, we need wisdom and sensitivity to the manifold of human affairs. Wisdom is attained through constant efforts to achieve rectitude and propriety. These efforts include learning to take care of what every moment of life requires, willingness to rectify faults, and keeping one's own person through all adversities (*jinshe* 謹身). Learning through experience with a humble mind will show the way to the truth.

To make the proper response in every moment, one has to adopt an alert and fearful attitude (*jieju* 戒懼) toward the contingencies of life. This attitude of caution does not result from calculating the advantages or disadvantages one may have from taking a certain course of action. It is the awareness of the contingencies of human lives where nothing lasts long that makes us humble and fearful. A yang state contains a yin element, and a yin state a yang element. Let's consider an example of a line statement of the third yang in *Qian*, that is, the top of the lower trigram located just below the upper trigram. Here, yang is in its proper position (the third, top being yang elements) but located in the lower

trigram, which contains yin force. The statement says, "The noble man makes earnest efforts throughout the day, and with evening he still takes care; though in danger, he will suffer no blame." In the "Commentary on the Words of the Text," we find this paraphrased as follows:

The noble man fosters his virtue and cultivates his task. He fosters his virtue by being loyal and trustworthy; he keeps his task in hand by cultivating his words and establishing his sincerity. A person who understands what a maximum point is and fulfills it can take part in the incipency of the moment. A person who understands what a conclusion is and brings it about can take part in the preservation of righteousness. . . . Thus when he occupies a high position, he is not proud, and when he is in a low position, he is not distressed. To be at the top of the lower trigram is still to be below the upper trigram.⁹

Being alert and fearful is a moral attitude commonly exhorted in Confucian texts, and constitutes a core value that differentiates Confucian ethics from a situation ethics of a relativist vein. This attitude keeps one from overreaching a maximum point and from pursuing the full realization of one's desire. Concerned consciousness or caution is a precondition under which one searches for what is right at the moment of action. It is an attitude that accepts the contingencies of human lives. One who is alert and fearful sincerely pursues rectitude and sincerity at the moment of one's choice of action. This attitude is needed to discern subtle changes in the processes of the world. It is not an expression of hesitation or oscillation between relative values. Rather, it helps one to find truth hidden in myriad moments of time. If one masters this moral attitude without losing rectitude in all actions, then one would suffer no blame and no regret. Unlike a relativist, who does not believe in a moral truth, a Confucian person being alert and fearful strongly believes in the existence of moral truths that underlie the moments of time and that are only revealed to searching and reflecting minds.

From Personal Morality to Social Ethics

Texts in Confucian ethics are abundant with everyday norms and exemplary models mainly focused on building moral character and traits in an individual, usually a male noble person (*junzi* 君子). They prescribe various ways for a person to be a morally right person modeled on a Confucian sage. But the final goal in Confucian ethics is not simply the perfection of an individual mind, or the fulfillment of virtues allotted to a person in accordance with social and familial position, but the common well-being of a wider community. Individual

moral fulfillments must converge upon the general well-being and order of a society, eventually producing harmony within it.

For example, there is a much cited a passage in the *Great Learning* to the effect mentioned above:

The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world.¹⁰

In the Confucian tradition, the philosophical and political base of the state is the family. As is widely recognized, a state is considered a big family. It is quite natural, therefore, that Confucian ethics is much focused on ramifying the role of an individual within a family and on analogically extending personal morality to the public arena. Most fundamental to making a Confucian individual is establishing sincerity within that individual's mind through constant inquiry into what is true. I have argued in the previous section that what differentiates Confucian ethics from situation ethics is the keen awareness of the true and of rectitude. The emphasis on knowledge is more conspicuous in the Neo-Confucian tradition than in the Yangming school.

The political ideal of the nation as a big family no longer serves the contemporary world based as it is on principles and laws not known to a traditional Confucian society. Confucian ethics nowadays seems to be left within the boundary of an individual life. To develop it into a social or political ethics, we need to pay attention to the spirit of the ethics of yinyang as an ethics of contingency that sees human civilization in constant change where nothing ever lasts. The ethics of contingency, as I have examined in the previous sections, suggests to us that there cannot be an eternal winner or loser, and that there cannot be ultimate otherness. It tells us that when one phase prevails, the opposite phase will soon follow. To live through such an ever-changing world we should continue to be alert and fearful without losing rectitude. This attitude is good not only for helping individuals to

keep their desires within certain limits, but also for helping the state to attain justice by keeping it from going to the extreme in making social policies and pursuing relations, political and economic, with other states. All, being interconnected and interpenetrating, are under the perennial changes and mutual influences in which we move toward an ideal goal of reaching balance and harmony. Based on the metaphysics and the ethics of yinyang, we may have to redefine the identity of an individual and a nation. We may also envision a world order in which it is the correlational and intercultural aspects that are most valued.

Notes

1. These diverse aspects of yinyang have been explored in my recent book; see Kim Heisook 김혜숙, *Sin eumyangnon: Dong Asia munhwa nollu ui haechae wa jaegeon* 新음양론: 동아시아 문화 논리의 해체와 재건 (A new interpretation of yinyang: Deconstructing and reconstructing the logic of East Asian culture) (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2014).

2. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and comp. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 266.

3. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 15–39.

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951), p. 469.

5. *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang Bi*, trans. Richard John Lynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 138.

6. Mencius, “Jin Xin I” 盡心章句上, 26:

Mencius said, “The principle of the philosopher Yang was: ‘Each one for himself.’ Though he might have benefited the whole kingdom by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it. The philosopher Mo loves all equally. If by rubbing smooth his whole body from the crown to the heel, he could have benefited the kingdom, he would have done it. Zi Mo holds a medium between these. By holding that medium, he is nearer the right. But by holding it without leaving room for the exigency of circumstances, it becomes like their holding their one point. The reason why I hate that holding to one point is the injury it does to the way of right principle. It takes up one point and disregards a hundred others.” (James Legge translation; see Chinese Text Project website at <http://ctext.org/mengzi/jin-xin-i>)

7. *Maengja jipju* 孟子集注 (Complete translation of the Mencius), trans. and annot. Seong Baek-hyo 懸吐完譯 (Seoul: Jeontong Munhwa Yeon’guhoe, 1996), p. 395.

8. Ibid.

9. See Lynn, *Classic of Changes*, p. 135, and *Maengja jipju*, p. 395.

10. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 86–87.