

MEMORIAL ENGAGEMENT

SELF AND SOCIAL ROLES AS CHIMERAS

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ABSTRACT: *In Against Individualism, Henry Rosemont argues against a contemporary Western concept of self that takes rational autonomy to be the “core” of what it means to be a person. Rational autonomy is thought to be the only essential feature of this core self, endowing us with an independent existence and moral framework to act accordingly—as independent, rational, autonomous individuals. In marked contrast, and drawing from the Analects of Confucius, Rosemont defines personhood as consisting of social roles and their correlative responsibilities. We are persons relationally, only in virtue of the roles that interdependently connect us to each other. Rosemont holds that the independent self is a chimera that leads to a problematic ethic where our connection to others is undermined instead of seen as central to who we are and how we should treat others. I argue that social roles are also chimeras that are constructed instead of metaphysically given. That is, while we are essentially social, how this plays out is variable and contingent. Moreover, I argue that we are essentially self-aware subjects—or embodied selves—whose personal experience is uniquely our own and inescapably filled with otherness. Both individualizing and socializing aspects of self are necessary as well as interdependent; moreover, favouring one over the other has both positive and negative consequences.*

Keywords: *personal identity, rational autonomy, social roles, Confucianism*

1. INTRODUCTION

For much of his life, Henry Rosemont was committed to teaching Confucian philosophy in a way he thought demonstrated its superiority to Western philosophies that define personhood in terms of qualities we possess in-and-of-ourselves instead in terms of our relatedness to others. The full title of Henry Rosemont’s most recent book—*Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion*—reveals its overarching thesis. He states his book’s purpose early on by saying, “I will first attempt to show that the view of human beings as most fundamentally free and rational, autonomous individual selves is almost certainly false, and more than that, mischievous: its celebration and defense

of freedom comes at the expense of social justice, and peace” (Rosemont 2015, xii). Rosemont argues that the early Confucian view of personhood, which takes personal identity to consist exclusively of the social roles that bind us morally to others, offers a radically different and far preferable view. He states that, when “suitably modified for contemporary circumstances and sensibilities”, the Confucian view should supplant the traditional Western view that takes personal identity to be grounded in qualities that we have in-and-of-ourselves, such as self-awareness, reason, and autonomy.

Although Rosemont goes on in his final work to tackle many other—political, social, and religious—issues, I will focus on this question of personal identity and its moral implications. More specifically, I will compare the Western individualistic view of self that Rosemont holds is false, mischievous, and worthy of being discarded altogether, with the Confucian social view, arguing instead that personal identity consists of an irreducible unity of subjective experience and objective content. Without contradiction, the self can be thought of as entailing an embodied awareness that has both individualizing and socializing features that interdependently interact. More specifically, embodied consciousness provides the medium for the formative social experiences out of which our personal identities are constructed. Both of these features are necessary, even in cultures that favour one feature over the other. I will also discuss how Confucian and Western views of self both have positive and negative implications, and how in both cases the negative implications result from the nature of the self being conceived in a mutually exclusive manner, i.e., as only in individualistic terms in the West and as only in social terms for Confucius.

2. ROSEMONT’S TARGET: THE WESTERN INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPT OF SELF

In “On the Existence of the Individual Self, and Self Identity”, Chapter Three of Rosemont’s book, he sets up the West’s general understanding of personal identity by stating:

The idea of the individual self, based on self-awareness that entails rationality, is one of the most deeply rooted constructs in the history of Western intellectual history. From its origins in ancient Greece in the tripartite nature of the soul through the Judaic-Christian unitary version thereof it has played a major role in shaping our sense of who and what we are, and how, therefore, we ought to live our lives, interact with our fellows, and shape the institutions in which we live together. (Rosemont 2015, 33)

This notion of the self, based on self-awareness, was clearly entailed in Descartes’ *Meditations*, where we find that the only “thing” we can know with certainty is that we exist as a “thinking” being. Stated in the first person to capture the inescapably subjective nature of experience, the only indubitable truth I can find—after finding that the content of all of my experience can be doubted—is that *I am, I exist*

(Descartes 1641, “Second Meditation”).¹ This experience of my “self” alone, as a “thing which thinks” or more accurately as a being who reflectively can ask questions about what I can know about what I think, reveals a truth that is foundational to self-awareness itself: that *I* most essentially exist as being who has (cognitive) experiences and core to this, a sense of self.

The role of reason is clearly central in the history of Western philosophy. Plato spoke of contemplation as the way to gain true knowledge (Plato *Republic*, VI.486a). Even Aristotle, who was far more committed to empirical observation, defined persons as “rational animals” distinguished from other non-human animals by virtue of our deliberative capacities (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.13). However, Kant represents Rosemont’s target even more, defining us, in Rosemont’s words, as “fundamentally free and rational, autonomous individual selves”. For Kant, a person is fundamentally self-legislating or self-governing, which rests on the *a priori* capacity to reason and act autonomously or of one’s own volition (Kant 1797, *Metaphysic of Morals*). Moreover, we have these abilities in-and-of-ourselves, not because they are socially conferred on us. This concept of self is the one Rosemont mainly takes issue with in his book *Against Individualism*.

3. CONCERNING ROSEMONT’S “ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF, AND SELF IDENTITY”

As far as being a person is concerned, I think Rosemont is correct in claiming that there is no independent “core self”. I must clarify my view, however: *There is no core self that can mean anything to us independent of how we conceive it*. The significance attached to what it means to be a person will depend on how we conceive it, but it does not follow that *what* we are thinking about has no independent reality. We cannot know anything without thinking about the thing we are trying to know, and to that extent that “thing” is a constructed concept.² For empirical objects, we can use observation to know them. But for “things” not conceived as being empirical—such as the above “core self”—some hold (such as Descartes and Kant) that they may be understood, or their existence “justified,” on metaphysical grounds. As we will now see though, others (such as Hume, the Buddhists, and Rosemont) see such “things” as at best articles of faith and at worst bad ideas that have led people astray, even catastrophically.³

¹ The full title, “Second Meditation: Of the Nature of the Human Mind, and that it is More Easily Known than the Body”, is often summarized by the dictum, *cogito ergo sum* or “I think, therefore I am.”

² This is reminiscent of Kant’s insight that knowledge is of *phenomena* only, as opposed to *noumena* or the “thing-in-itself” (Kant 1781, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A369).

³ For example, Marx referred to (e.g., theological) religion, including the faith we are supposed to have in an everlasting (immaterial) “God” and “soul”, as one of the most oppressive institutions “made by man”. In response, I suggest considering that Marx’s “materialist” account of history was not only idealistic, but has been responsible for bringing about the death of many millions of people.

Rosemont never favoured transcendental thinking, as one can tell from the wealth of his writings and presentations. His reference to the self as a “chimera”—an unreal, fanciful creature of the imagination that also has connotations of being ugly or grotesque—is very apt given his Confucian bent. For Rosemont, the metaphysical idea of self is not only no good, it also leads to harm. Buddhists present a similar belief with their idea of No Self, a heretical rejection of the Hindu idea of *Atman* or the “Self” conceived as the divine essence or nonmaterial “soul” in every creature (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2.11-53).⁴ Buddhism speaks to the problem with the Hindu essentialist view of Self in many places; but mainly, it is concerned with the way the concept creates the very attachments (to Self) that give rise to suffering (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 1.22). British empiricist David Hume also argued that personal identity is not real. The self is *just an idea* or “fiction of the imagination” that follows from or is connected with our experiences, instead of being an unchanging (self-identical) essence required for experience to be possible in the first place (Hume 1740, Part IV.VI). Despite their differences, however, the main implication for self-identity that these sceptical views hold in common is this: *There is no essential, unchanging individual self that exists in-itself, independent of context and relatedness.*

Rosemont is not just espousing such a view about personal identity in *Against Individualism*. He states,

But if the individual self is a chimera, then moral and political theories based on it as a grounding concept may well be misconceived, and consequently we may need some new (or very old) ideas of who and what we are, how we ought to live our lives, interact with our fellows, and shape the institutions in which we live together. (Rosemont 2015, 33)

Rosemont’s solution to the West’s misguided individualism is to adopt a Confucian view of “who and what we are”, where being a person means being a nexus of relationships and roles appropriate to them. The five “basic” relationships are as follows (modernized to make sense in our contemporary world): parent to child, older to younger sibling (or relation), spouse to spouse, official to citizen, and benefactor to beneficiary (or for Mencius, friend to friend).⁵ This Confucian view differs from the Buddhist concept of No Self in that the Confucian self is *constituted by* our most basic relationships and responsibilities. We have a self (instead of No Self) that is defined by our most basic relationships. In my case, I am my parents’ middle daughter and the mother of my four children. I am both an older and younger sibling because I have both a younger and older sibling. I am a spouse to my spouse, to whom I have been married for over 26 years. I am a citizen of the USA and currently

⁴ The *Bhagavad Gita* contrasts this notion of *Atman* with the personal self or living person (*jiva*), which is not who we *really* are. Our falsely identifying with our personal (embodied) existence leads not to *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), but rather, to its continuation.

⁵ In *Polishing the Chinese Mirror*, a collection of essays in honor of Henry Rosemont, Jr. edited by Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn, I presented a similar hierarchy or relations in my contribution called “The Virtue of Freedom” (Chandler & Littlejohn 2008, 127-145).

a resident of the state of California. I am a teacher because I have students, and I am a colleague to others who also teach at Humboldt State University.

This Confucian view of self has two main features. First, I am the person I am *because of my relationships*. I could not be a daughter without parents, a mother without children, a sibling without siblings, a spouse without a spouse, and the like. In other words, my identity as a person is conferred upon me by others instead of being something I possess in-and-of-myself. As such, I am not an individual but I am a *social* being. Second, as my relationships change over time, *I* change over time. The example that I present here with love and gratitude is that I am a teacher of philosophy in large part because of my teacher, Henry Rosemont, Jr. I was Henry's student, trained in the discipline and enriched as a person along the way. I became a teacher because Henry helped to teach me how to be one, and now I am a committed teacher to my students in turn. With Henry's passing—with the loss of my teacher, mentor, and friend—I have become a different person. But losing Henry does not mean that I lose the part of me that exists because of him. We are established as persons by the formative relationships that meaningfully continue to impact and transform our lives.

4. MY CRITIQUE OF ROSEMONT'S EXCLUSIVELY SOCIAL VIEW OF SELF OR PERSONAL IDENTITY

I hold then, that there is no essential, unchanging individual self that exists in-itself, independent of context and relatedness. Let me clarify once again: there is no such self that exists for us that is free from interpretation, or that would make any moral sense without having its significance shaped by how we think and what we value. While thinking and valuing are universal human capacities, how we think and what we value are both culture-specific and meant to apply to a world populated with others. Our world is necessarily context-dependent in resting on such culturally transmitted and socially directed values and beliefs. In a mainstream Western context, the belief in an individual self, conceived as rational and autonomous, is central to our vision of who we are and what we ought to value. But this is only a partial account of what personhood may entail.

To spell this out more fully, I am sympathetic with Rosemont's view that such a "core self" is an abstraction, or a construct or concept that may be used for ill, but I do not believe that this view of self as described—as exclusively devoid of social content and relatedness—is accurate. Once a proper account is given, the more specific role that rational autonomous thought serves in establishing who and what we are as persons can be brought to light, and it is not as problematic as Rosemont claims.

Rosemont takes our roles to be real and the rational autonomous self to be a chimera, but let's look at this "problem" more closely. The core self in principle could consist of any number of things that we think are essential to personhood. First, if we think that rational autonomy is the most important or "essential" feature of being a person—or that we are persons *because* of it, or in the extreme, because of it

alone—then other features of our lives will be thought of as less self-defining or as not defining at all. Even in this case, this does not mean that our relationships with others will be less important to us. We can see every person as being a rational autonomous agent in their own right, and value them as much if not more than we value ourselves.⁶ Second, as an *activity*, how we reason and choose to navigate our way through this world is as dynamic as the social roles we embody. Whether we think of our core selves in terms of our *capacity* to think and (freely) choose, or in terms of our capacity to form meaningful relationships, both are reasonable (although I think partial) interpretations of what actually makes us persons.

I believe our capacity for rational autonomous thought is fundamental to our personhood, but it is only part of a more comprehensive sense of subjectivity that serves as the basis for our experience *as individuals*, which will be discussed in the following section. For current purposes, I agree with Rosemont's claim that the rational autonomous self is a concept, but the social roles we embody are *also* concepts—or ways to think of ourselves as mothers, sisters, spouses, teachers, citizens, friends, etc. Others socialize us according to their roles, and many experiences we have because of these others end up being *formative* to our development as persons—that is, they are essential to our identity. As we continue to mature, our roles and their correlative responsibilities continue to establish who we are in relation to others. The capacity for such development is as essential to our identity as persons as is the capacity for autonomous thought.

Distinguishing the rational and relational capacities from their applications is helpful here. Our capacity for autonomous thought *and* our capacity for embodying roles are both uniquely and universally human. These capacities *individualize* us however—or make us the particular persons that we become over the course of our lives—only in being put into practice. Having the capacities by themselves is not sufficient to establish who *I* am, or who *you* are, or who *anybody* is in their uniquely embodied, personal mode. That is, the capacities are generically human, but they also have inherently formative powers meant to be put into practice. Before that, we are nothing more than generic persons with no distinctive personal identity at all.

To sum up: the capacity for rational autonomy and the capacity for embodying roles are both necessary to establishing personhood in general. But how each of us does this in the context of culture and in the course of our own lives is what individuates us. Moreover, we transform our “selves” and the world we live in by putting these capacities into practice. In other words, self-construction is an interactive, dynamic process that is part of a larger world-constructive process. For example, consider how the notions of being a member of a family, or having a gender as opposed to a sex, have changed over the years and across the globe. Also consider

⁶ Consider the love and commitment that parents routinely have for their children. Even though we in the West tend to see ourselves as fundamentally capable of free thought and action, that does not mean that we value that capacity more than we value our children. Similarly, as we will see later on, the Western tendency to think individualistically does not necessarily lead to greater selfishness. In fact, people who fundamentally believe that they derive their personal meaning and worth from others may have expectations of those others to live an accomplished life because it reflects well on them.

the personal and social impact that gender-nonconforming or LGBTQ (etc.) identities have had, as well as how they have changed and continue to do so.⁷ Most importantly, rational autonomy and the embodiment of roles function *interdependently*. That is, how we develop our roles and execute our responsibilities will be shaped by how we think (e.g., about the roles themselves), and how we think will be shaped by the people and events that have been formative to our development. Rational autonomy by its moral nature has profound social applicability, while roles are social constructs that we can embody as well as reasonably critique, and even change.

In a moral context, the pressure that individuals and groups bring to bear to accommodate their needs and interests is in part how culture is changed. When everything is going smoothly, or when complaints are few and changes occur in a spontaneous and harmonious manner, then all is well. This is Confucius' vision of the good life. However, when something is identified as a social problem in need of change, the group (of individuals) holding that view will not agree that harmony is the best course of action if it serves to maintain the status quo. Without good reason, they could not make a case for why some of the *li*⁸ 禮 or ritualized customs of their culture—that still help maintain social stability and privilege for a majority but at the expense of a smaller or less powerful group—need to change.⁹ Without autonomy, they would not be able to think for themselves, think critically, or see their interests¹⁰ as having intrinsic value even when elements of the larger society do not see them that way. Rational autonomy allows us to have our own reasons for wanting things to change in a way that grounds the interests of people not equally protected by mainstream culture. Because of it, we can determine for ourselves how we want things to be as well as how best to make that happen, even if this challenges current

⁷ Personal identity may be constructed out of an interaction between already existing private personal experiences and the social identification of that kind of experience. For example, some have claimed that homosexuals do not exist in their society, and now in some of those (such as China) homosexuality is on the rise, in part because people now have a way of identifying certain preferences or practices *as being* “gay”, or “lesbian”, or “bisexual”, etc. An identity may not (fully) exist until it is socially defined *as being* (thus). Similarly, a social problem may not (fully) exist until identified *as being* a “problem”. For example, one may claim that sexism does not exist in her culture because “sexism” is not a working concept in that culture. But does that mean that no preferences or practices would count as sexist, just because they have not been identified as such? A society can change its normative structure according to some social construct only after it has come on the scene, but it does not follow that the concept would have no application once put into practice.

⁸ *Li* 禮 is translated as “ritual propriety” by Ames and Rosemont in their translation of *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (Ames & Rosemont 1998).

⁹ I cover this topic in my article, “Emotions, Ethics, and Equality: Humanity (*Rén* 仁) as ‘True Moral Feeling’” in *Dimensions of Moral Agency* (Boersma 2014, 61-96). *Rén* 仁 has various translations; to name a few: benevolence, nobility, humanity, humaneness, human-heartedness, humanity at its best, compassion, love, and authoritative conduct (Ames and Rosemont’s translation in the *Analects*). It is the most important “human” virtue, according to Confucius.

¹⁰ This would include being an “ally”, or having an interest in helping to support or protect the interests of those in a less privileged group.

embodied values and norms.¹¹ Rational autonomy invests persons with a *critical* moral capacity that must be put into practice to pursue its moral aim. Thus, the capacity for rational autonomous thought and critical thinking as a moral activity are interdependently connected.

5. THE SELF AS A PRAGMATIC, INTERACTIVE CONCEPT

I hold that the Western individualistic concept of self that is taken to be devoid of context and content (the one Rosemont condemns as fictitious and dangerous) is off base and needs to be redefined. To begin, our pervasive sense of subjectivity, which is the basis for experiencing ourselves as being individuals, is a function of the *consciousness we embody*. This broader phenomenological experience of our own subjectivity entails rational autonomy, but it contains much more than that. For instance, we are aware of ourselves as being the subject of a range of different emotions. We are aware of experiencing various changes connected with living, growing, and dying; changes that more often than not occur without our voluntary, rational and autonomous consent. We are also essentially and profoundly aware of the people we care about, and less so, of those who we end up sharing a world with (also usually fortuitously). Some of the most important “facts” about this world concern the people we are closest to, or who have been the most formative in our lives. The more that people and events are formative in our lives, the more essential they will be to establishing who we are as persons.

Thus, the core self as I see it entails two features that interdependently give rise to the uniquely human experience of *oneself* as a particular subject *in a world* necessarily populated with otherness. Together, they comprise one overall self-and-world-constructive activity that we may separate only for the purpose of analysis. I will now more fully explain this new account of self where the so-called individualistic and social features of our “selves” are both necessary, mutually interactive aspects of personhood.

What does the “individual self” meant to me? What do I mean when *I* refer to *myself*, such as by using these very pronouns? I am referring to my *own embodied awareness of being a subject of experience in a world with other such subjects*. Embodied consciousness is necessarily linked to otherness; to people, places, things, perceptions, memories, desires, thoughts, emotions, etc., that make up the distinct phenomenological content of each person’s experience. Moreover, the consciousness we embody gives each of us a sense of being a distinct subject of experience, that

¹¹ *Li* 禮 or “ritual propriety” is the Confucian term for the embodied values that are practiced by one’s culture and that promote harmonious human interaction. To be *li* 禮 those values are *enacted* and are not just dormant dispositions to act. My point is that human interactions may on moral grounds need to involve friction and even protest if harmony is achieved at the expense of a marginalized minority. That is, I read *rén* 仁 or “human flourishing” to include the idea that greater social unity may be achieved over time by a greater inclusivity brought about by morally justified social conflict and change (see footnote 9).

now we can identify *as being our own*.¹² We are aware that other such persons populate our world too; that they are subjects of their own experience as we are of our own. Essentially, the self serves this pragmatic function, for embodied consciousness *interdependently* links us to the people, places, and events that it brings to our awareness. Thus, the “individual self” consists of embodied consciousness that is itself essentially and inescapably social—filled with the people and events that meaningfully make up our world. As such, we cannot be persons without finding ourselves in a world of otherness.¹³

6. THE PROBLEM CLARIFIED: THE SELF CONCEIVED AS A FALSE DICHOTOMY

As Rosemont warned, we should be cautious of the pitfalls of having an overly individualistic view of self. But we should also be cautious of the problems with having an overly social view of self. Right away though, we must see that the distinction between “individual (e.g., rational autonomous) self” and “social (role-bearing) self” is inaccurate, *since the consciousness we embody is necessarily out-directed or linked to the persons and events (etc.) that it brings to our awareness*. This is not to present a deterministic view where the content of our experience could not be otherwise. Rather, the experiences that have been the *most formative or personally defining* become part of our “core,” whether or not those experiences could have been different.

The problem that this discussion has brought to our attention, results from the fact that the West has had a long tradition of defining personhood in terms of generic capacities, one’s that we all possess such as rational autonomy, while China has had a long tradition of defining personhood in terms of actual roles and practices that persons embody. The West has focused on features that make us who we are in-and-of-ourselves instead of ones socially conferred upon us by others. This difference is based on China being more practical in its philosophical and cultural orientation, while the West has been more abstract *in the sense* that generic human capacities that we share more or less “equally” have been the main focus.

The main problem in both cases lies in conceiving of personal identity *exclusively*: as *either* being a function of capacities *or* (used in the exclusive sense) as

¹² Having even profound experiences is not the same as identifying what those experiences are, or what they mean to us. This more active process of identification entails (1) that we reflect on our experiences and (2) that we name them or make them explicit to ourselves. Both (1) and (2) involve interpretation and evaluation. Having a self or being a person is not just imposed from the outside; (e.g.) in virtue of the social roles and responsibilities conferred upon us by our culture. Part of building a self involves how we ourselves want to be identified by others.

¹³ Using the language of “otherness” may bring out our sense of being distinctive, separate and even alienated from others, rather than being essentially connected to them. To this I would say that some of our relationships are more impersonal than others, and these are the ones that we may not see as being vital to who we are as persons or as relevant to our identity at all. The closer we are to others, the more of a personal connection we have with them, the more likely and appropriately we will use terms of endearment and intimacy to describe them.

being a function of the active processes these capacities make possible. Casting the matter in this way creates a false dichotomy where the capacities and practices essential to actually being a person are thought to be *opposed* to one another instead of as being mutually interactive. We have capacities in order for them to be put into practice, and we could do nothing at all without them. More specifically, our capacity for moral agency only functions in virtue of being “activated”.¹⁴ If not cultivated or put into practice, the innate formative power of personhood can bear no moral fruit. In effect, no person (or at least no good person) can develop at all.¹⁵

What might result positively from giving moral priority to the more generic capacities that we all have intrinsically and regardless of our social differences? Or what benefits may accrue from thinking of our identity as something we possess in-and-of-ourselves rather than as something conferred upon us by others? Rosemont sees only the problems, but focusing on the “abstract individual” serves as the basis for the correlative notions of self-governance (Kant) and self-ownership (Locke) that gave rise, for example, to the concept of *equal rights* that aims to uniformly protect all “individuals” insofar as they are thought to count as persons. What might be a cost of giving moral priority to such intrinsic capacities when it comes to identity formation? Privileging the intrinsic or “internal” features of self may promote an inward focus on one’s own conscious experience at the expense of being considerate of others. This may generate selfishness and social alienation that undermines one’s sense of belonging. In other words, committing ourselves to others *as if they were a vital part of us* may be undermined, which in turn undermines our sense of connection to them and our sense of belonging in the world. This is Rosemont’s worry.

What might result positively from giving moral priority to the practices through which the self is socialized? Privileging a concept of self, defined in terms of embodied social roles and responsibilities, promotes an outward focus that aims to benefit others. Focusing our attention on others—especially on how we can benefit them—tends to generate greater social harmony and commitment to human flourishing in general (*rén* 仁). Our sense of belonging is also enhanced by seeing our identity formation as being dependent upon helping others thrive, instead of as being established independently by reasoning according to some universal moral principle.

What might be a cost of giving moral priority to the personal interactions and social practices that establish us socially? Conceiving of identity in terms of social roles runs the risk of nepotism, elitism, sexism, racism, and other social problems that arise from denying full humanity to others due to social differences, instead of seeing them as possessing intrinsic value and equal worth. My being a person because of you

¹⁴ Mencius’ (or Mengzi’s) account of human nature is not unlike my pragmatic account in this regard: the “seeds”, “sprouts”, or “beginnings” of moral virtue need to be “activated”, i.e., cultivated by culture and upbringing, or they simply die. As with my account, morally good actions grow out of the inherent activity of the “seed” as it is formed or given shape through learning (*Mengzi*, 2A.6).

¹⁵ Notice on my interactive view of self, that we are unique or distinctive even though we may embody like roles or may think along similar lines. Here again, a false dichotomy is created by conceiving of the “universal” and the “diverse” as mutually exclusive instead of as mutually entailing.

may also motivate me to care about you only because it helps me build a better, more socially respectable self.¹⁶ This can lead to a kind of selfishness resulting from a lack of critical examination of the roles themselves (e.g., who the relationships actually benefit and how).

The Confucian problem of defining personhood in terms of social roles instead of rational autonomy is this: being a “good” *rén* 仁 person only requires that we embody our roles well, in part so we can help others to flourish in their socially prescribed roles too. But whether this is a good thing remains to be seen. In short, Confucianism lacks an explicit mechanism whereby we reflect on and critically evaluate the legitimacy of the roles themselves, including the ethic or normative structure that each implies.¹⁷ Confucianism can look to the West for guidance here, where critical analysis and the individual worth of persons are central to its mission.

The Western problem of identifying personhood in terms of rational autonomy instead of social roles is this: being a “good” *rational and autonomous* person only requires that we think critically and act freely, in order to protect those very qualities conceived as the basis for self-determination. But then social roles are only contingent facts about us (Rosemont’s criticism), or the others who have been essential to our personal development are not seen as essential at all. As moral beings though, our personhood depends on our cultivating the *rén* 仁 humanity that binds us to each other. The West can look to Confucianism for guidance here, since social roles and their correlative responsibilities to others are central to its mission.

To conclude, the costs of both mainstream Western and Confucian views of personhood increase, the more extreme or exclusive they are; that is, where innate capacities and the activities they give rise to are conceived as being mutually opposed to one another instead of as functioning interdependently. We can think of ourselves as rights-bearing *and* as role-bearing,¹⁸ once we realize that the embodied awareness with which we develop an identity is essential to the identity we construct, and the identity we construct is essentially filled with social content.¹⁹ Our social lives provide the context out of which our identities are constructed, and embodied consciousness provides the medium through which they are constructed.²⁰ Both embodied self *and* the world it brings to life are essential, interactive aspects of what it means to be a person. As for Rosemont’s specific complaint, once we understand that rational autonomy and social roles are *both socially constructed* or different ways

¹⁶ *The Analects of Confucius* (6:30) speaks to how becoming an “authoritative” or *rén* 仁 person depends on helping others establish themselves (as persons). The implied motive is mainly to help other flourish as persons.

¹⁷ I address this topic more fully in my responses to Nkiru Nzegwu’s “How if At All is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy” (Nzegwu, Bockover, Chaudhuri and Femenias 2016, my responses: 83-87, 101-106).

¹⁸ Rosemont discusses this tension in “Right-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons”, his contribution to *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility*, my collection of essays dedicated to Herbert Fingarette (Bockover 1991, 71-101).

¹⁹ This is critical; the more formative persons or experiences are in our lives, the more they must be counted in “what and who we are as persons”.

²⁰ A key implication here is that the embodied self is social in nature.

to *think about* what it means to be a person (with both positive and negative effects), then we can see them as the pragmatic devices that they are—as ideas that we can use to further our interests, whatever we may conceive those to be.

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