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MEMORIAL ENGAGEMENT

DELIBERATE ONE-SIDEDNESS AS A METHOD OF DOING PHILOSOPHY: REFLECTIONS ON ROSEMONT'S VIEW OF THE PERSON

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ABSTRACT: *As one of the most influential comparative philosophers of our time, Henry Rosemont, Jr. is known for his unrelenting criticisms against Western libertarian ideas, and for advocating ideas derived from classic Confucian thought. One of the criticisms against him is that his views are one-sided, and hence unfair to Western libertarian ideas. In this paper, I argue that Rosemont's one-sidedness is deliberate. His theory is not intended to be a balanced account. I will illustrate that Rosemont's way of conceiving the human self is not peculiar to him, but characteristic of those who take philosophy as a way of life, such as Mencius and Sartre. I shall argue that their practices suggest a* gong-fu *perspective, with which we evaluate philosophical theories according to their functions in shaping people's behaviors and with consideration of the context of their uses.*

Keywords: *Henry Rosemont, Individualism, social roles, Confucianism*

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most influential comparative philosophers of our time, Henry Rosemont, Jr. is known for his unrelenting criticisms against Western libertarian ideas, and for advocating ideas derived from classic Confucian thought. Like any thought-provoking philosophers, his views have triggered enthusiasm as well as controversies. One of the criticisms against him is that his views are one-sided, and hence unfair to Western libertarian ideas. Some critics complain that Rosemont compares the ideal Confucian system of righteous rulers, which seldom existed in practice, with the worst consequences in actual practices of liberal ideas. This kind of comparison inevitably works to the former's advantage (Li, 16-17; Svensson 2002, 57-8). To this, Rosemont had anticipated with a reply:

> [P]artisanship does not entail an unbalanced account; on the contrary, one of my major purposes in presenting it was to offer a balance to what I regard as ideologically skewed

> standard accounts, accounts that are all too common in sinological scholarship on contemporary China, and in the commercial television and print coverage of the country. (Rosemont 1991, 2)

In other words, his one-sidedness is deliberate. His theory is not in itself a balanced account but an account provided to achieve a balance for the larger context. It is more an action than a pure timeless representation of reality.

This raises an interesting question that is both philosophical and meta-philosophical: what does it mean to *do* philosophy? Are philosophers supposed to explain the world or change the world? Or is the "either/or" way of raising the question itself an unfound prejudice that should be rejected in the first place?

Without pretending to offer a comprehensive account for the big question, in this paper I will take Rosemont's criticism against the libertarian concept of the human as an example and offer some philosophical reflections. I will illustrate that Rosemont's contextualized way of conceiving the human self is not peculiar to him, but characteristic of those who take philosophy as a way of life, such as Mencius and Sartre. I shall argue that their practices suggest a *gong-fu* perspective, with which we evaluate philosophical theories according to their functions in shaping people's behaviors and with consideration of the context of their uses.

I

Rosemont has long been critical of the libertarian concept of the human being understood as right-bearing autonomous rational individual. As early as 1991, he stated his basic position clearly:

> [T]ere are no disembodied minds, nor autonomous individuals; human relationships govern and structure most of our lives, to the point that unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings. … [T]he contemporary philosophical and social scientific stereotype of a disembodied, purely logical and calculating autonomous individual is simply too far removed from what we feel and think human beings to be. (Rosemont 1991, 63)

Instead of the individualist concept, Rosemont promotes a Confucian role-based concept of person. He argues that we are human beings with concrete bodies in specific spatio-temporal locations, which generate impulses, emotions, and attitudes; and these inclinations are deeply affected by our social relations and cultural traditions. This thick notion of human being is, in his view, much more in accord with our intuitions. We come to know each other and encounter each other not as abstract individuals but as a specific nexus of social relations. We are so essentially related that we don't just *play* the roles of being a father, a teacher, a friend, etc. We *are* these roles (Rosemont 1991, 72).

Throughout his academic career, Rosemont upheld this view and developed a systematic articulation of it. His latest book, *Against Individualism* (2015), places the issue within the context of contemporary philosophy, Western as well as Chinese, and

examines the concept of self both in its descriptive and normative dimensions. He argues that, descriptively, the libertarian concept of the rational autonomous individual self is a concept of a ghost, and taken normatively, it would generate deep social problems. In contrast, the Confucian role-based concept of person can serve as the foundation for a more sensible global ethics and a human-centered religiousness that requires no metaphysics or theology. Unfolding from his initial criticism of the libertarian notion of self and promotion of the role-bearing person, we find a systematic philosophical theory that covers fundamental issues about metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of language, of science, and of religion.

Rosemont is not shy in admitting that his view is asymmetrical and one-sided. He states clearly that it is his deliberate choice. Consistent with the quote cited from his 1991 book, he says in his 2015 book,

> Throughout I will be arguing against rights-claiming, free and autonomous individuals and for role-bearing, interrelated and responsible (thus encumbered) persons. I will of course not be altogether fair to the individualist position. But they have had champions *in excelsis* for over two hundred years, and certainly don't need any assistance from me. (Rosemont 2015, xiv)

Reading Rosemont closely, we find that his choice of one-sidedness rests on several considerations. First, it is to counterbalance an existing asymmetry and achieve a balance in a larger context, as the above quote indicates. For the past two hundred years the Western libertarian position has dominated the world to the degree that it has shaped the language of social-political philosophy, which entails tacit acceptance of its presuppositions. People can hardly think beyond its vocabulary. To counterbalance this dominance is to open up the possibility of thinking beyond the box and seeing alternative ways of conceiving ourselves.

Certainly it would be unnecessary if the dominant concept is already perfect. Rosemont's another reason for his one-sidedness is that, in his view, the libertarian notion of self is seriously flawed, and the Confucian notion of self is much more reasonable. This can be approached from two perspectives—descriptive and normative. Descriptively, Rosemont argues that the libertarian notion of self is but a ghost, for it is an abstraction that is impossible to specify, because once all the specifics about me are stripped away, what is left is just an empty indexical "I". In contrast, our relational roles are much more concrete and identifiable through experiences, and they represent the way through which we actually identify ourselves (e.g. as this teacher, this father, this colleague, etc.). However, as a philosopher who is fully aware of the complexities of the issue of self-identity, Rosemont acknowledges that, actually

> Whether we are ultimately autonomous individuals or co-members of the human community is of course not an empirical question, and I know of no conclusive rational argument for one or the other, *a priori* or otherwise. Worse, these differing views are in many ways self-prophetic; the more we believe ourselves to be essentially autonomous individuals, the more

> easily we become such. (Rosemont 2001b, 91)

This leads us to a third reason for his one-sidedness, one that is associated with the normative aspect of the individualist concept. Rosemont argues that the libertarian view of a free, autonomous rational individual self is "largely responsible for much of the malaise increasingly definitive of it" (Rosemont 2001b, 91). Yet, he still acknowledges the great contributions of the libertarian notion in the history:

> Since this foundational individualism in its differing guises became dominant in the early years of the Enlightenment it accomplished a great deal conceptually in justifying the American and French Revolutions, and thereby contributed significantly to the enhancement of the political, social and creative lives of tens of millions of people throughout the Western world for over two centuries. If, as I am maintaining herein, foundational individualism is now much more conducive to the justification of inequality and oppression rather than justice or liberation—and diminution of democracy—for an increasing number of people in the West and elsewhere, at the same time I certainly do not want to diminish, disregard or do away with the manifold benefits that the grounding concept has brought to humankind during its preeminent period. (Rosemont 2015, 60-61)

Today, the overall context has changed. This libertarian notion of self "is now coming increasingly to the fore as the growing maldistribution of wealth both within and between nations becomes starker," and the concept of freedom, which is in the same concept-cluster, "is complicit in the manifold problems capitalist countries seem incapable of dealing with effectively" (Rosemont 2015, 68, 69). This, of course, does not exclude the fact that in many contexts of the world, the situation remains such that foundational individualism has not lived out of its usefulness.

Still another reason for Rosemont's one-sidedness toward the Chinese Confucian view is that, in Rosemont's observation, there is another asymmetry between the role-based notion and the individualist notion. It is easier and more natural to get the best out of the individual notion from first embracing the role-bearing notion than the other way around. In comparing first generation human rights (civil and political rights), which are based on the individual notion of self, with second generation human rights (social, economic and cultural rights) more in line with the role-bearing notion of self, Rosemont says:

> By focusing on the free, rational autonomous individual it becomes very difficult to leap the chasm that separates the right of free speech form the right of health care, and worse, continues to make possible a "blame the victim" rationale for ignoring the plight of the less fortunate despite its absurdity, … .
>
> Role-bearing related persons central to the Confucian vision, on the other hand, take second-generation rights very seriously, yet do not need to ignore, or even downgrade, what the first ten amendments to the Constitution are designed to protect. (Rosemont 2015, 111)

In addition to all the above, there is one last reason for Rosemont's one-sidedness. Being a Westerner, Rosemont feels a responsibility for being critical of his own tradition. Quoting Alasdair MacIntyre, he explains (Rosemont 2001a) his one-sidedness:

> [T]he only way to approach a point at which our own standpoint could be vindicated against some rival is to understand our own standpoint in a way that renders it from our own point of view as problematic as possible and therefore as maximally vulnerable as possible to defeat by that rival. (MacIntyre, 1991, 121)

This approach is also quite consistent with Rosemont's "role-bearing" ethics. In terms of moral roles, there is indeed an asymmetry between oneself and others—it is widely accepted as a virtue to be strict to oneself and be lenient to others.

From the above sketch we can see that Rosemont's theory is not a flat account that aims at laying out an ahistorical and universal truth, but instead, a theory that is constructed out of a particular historical context and promoted for the sake of correcting a problematic tendency. In this sense his role ethics is actually a contextual ethics, and it is a therapeutic action rather than a pure timeless representation of reality. It is conducted for the sake of counterbalancing a problematic one-sidedness that has long existed in the world as a dominant, if not exclusive, voice, so that we can have a healthier approach of life.

II

This contextualized deliberate one-sided way of doing philosophy is not peculiar to Rosemont. We may illustrate this through two other theories of human self—Mencius' and Sartre's.

Mencius is famous for his theory that human beings are by nature good, because humans are all born with the "four hearts" or "four incipient tendencies" – the heart of compassion, the heart of shame, the heart of courtesy and modesty, and the heart of rights and wrongs. Clearly Mencius is not unaware of the fact that humans are also born with selfish tendencies. Why does he not choose the selfish tendencies as human nature? The standard answer is that, according to Mencius, the four hearts are what distinguishes humans from animals. However, it does not take much effort to discover that even this definition of human nature is itself a result of deliberate choice, as one can choose to define "human nature" differently. Mencius' opponent Gao Zi, for instance, defines human nature as whatever one is born with, and from there he derives his view that human nature is neither good nor evil, and Xun Zi defines human nature as what cannot be learned and cannot be acquired by effort, from there he derives his view that human nature is evil (see *Xun-Zi*, 158).

Mencius' deliberate choice to be one-sided in this way is most clearly revealed in the following passage:

> It is due to our nature that our mouths desire sweet taste, that our eyes desire beautiful colors, …. But there is also fate [whether these desires are satisfied or not]. The superior

> man does not say they are man's nature [and insist on satisfying them]. The virtue of humanity in the relationship between father and son, the virtue of righteousness in the relationship between ruler and minister, …— these are [endowed in people in various degrees] according to fate. But there is also man's nature. The superior man does not [refrain from practicing them and] say they are matters of fate. (*Mencius*, 7B/24)

Zhu Xi explains,

> These two kinds of tendencies are both in our nature that are given to us by heaven. Yet ordinary people take the first five [that our mouths desire sweet taste, etc.] as human nature, and when they don't have the desired objects they insist on having them. They take the latter five [The virtue of humanity in the relationship between father and son, etc.] as fate, once they don't have them, they give up. This is why Mencius speaks on what needs to be emphasized with regard to each in order to advocate one and discourage the other. (Zhu, *Meng-Zi-Ji-Zhu-Da-Quan*, vol. 14, 23)

In light of this, we see that Mencius is more offering a recommendation of how to conceive/construct human identity than providing a pure descriptive theory of what our human essence is. In other words, it is more an "ought statement" than an "is statement". The distinction between human and animal is but a contingent fact used to make the recommendation. If it just happened to be the case that the distinction between humans and animals on this planet was not which possessed the four hearts, but which had the ability to lie, Mencius would surely not say that we humans should define ourselves accordingly and develop this peculiarity.

We may say the same with Sartre's concept of the human. Contrary to Rosemont, Sartre advocates the concept of the human as free, autonomous (though not necessarily so rational) individuals. Knowing quite well that such an individual is like a "ghost," hard to grasp with any concrete experience, Sartre bluntly calls it "nothingness." But this nothingness is not literally nothing. It is the possibility of making choices. It is "nothingness" in the sense that one's essence comes only after one makes choices. To stress this point, Sartre famously claims, "Man is nothing but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 1993, 15). He pushes his point to such a radical degree that, he says, "There are no innocent victims." Even being a victim is the result of a choice in the sense that "What happens to me happens through me." "The worst threats which can endanger my person have *meaning* only in and *through* my project" (Sartre 1993, 53). Because I make the choice of not taking an offense lightly, I am responsible for my becoming a victim of the offense. Out of this logic, he makes the stunning remark to the victims of the World War II: "We have the war we deserve" (Sartre 1993, 53), because "It depended on me that for me and by me this war *should* not exist, and I have decided that it *does* exist" (Sartre 1993, 55).

Taking it descriptively, Sartre's theory is one-sided and almost absurd. Experience tells us too well that we do not get to choose who our parents are, where we are born, and what social and economic conditions we grow up with. Sartre's theory makes sense only because he predefined "human being" as choice-maker, and nothing else. The logic is similar to define "money" to be U. S. Dollars first, and then claim that

money is nothing but U. S. Dollars. But given the fact that people usually underestimate the scope in which they can make choices and that people tend to blame their social and natural environment for what happens to them, Sartre perceives an important need to stress the fact that we humans are different from ordinary objects. We can choose who we want to be and define our own lives accordingly. We should hold up our subjectivity and take up responsibilities. In order to achieve this, Sartre deliberately makes his point through stunning remarks so that people can be shocked out of their "bad faith." One can certainly challenge Sartre by saying, how about the innocent children whose lives are devastated by the war? He would say that, so far as they can choose to dislike the war, they should not conceive themselves as merely passive receivers of the suffering but as active resisters against it. Here, we see also that an apparently descriptive theory of human nature turns out to be a normative therapeutic action of pushing people toward a proactive and responsible way of life.

III

We may venture to say that no one can be completely free from one-sidedness. The difference is usually only a matter of degree and whether one uses it deliberately or fall into it unknowingly. Everything is concrete and complex, and once we use language to describe a thing we are abstracting certain features out of the complexity and simplifying it.

We may also venture to say that all philosophical theories may be used to "do things," just as words and sentences can. We may never be able to settle the dispute about what a human being is, but all ideas about human being mould our behaviors. Different concepts of self are ways of self-conception that, like different styles of martial art, each has its own advantages and limitations, although all are not equally good. The role-based concept of person allows each member of a society to have a clear sense of mutual dependence and to develop a sense of caring for the interest of others, but at the same time, it is also likely to breed a sense of privilege. In a role-based society, people are constantly reminded of their roles, and hence their duties and responsibilities, but it can also propagate a sense of social hierarchy and inequality among the people. The concept of autonomous rational individual self may help one hold up one's subjectivity and personal integrity, stand firm on one's own judgement and take responsibility for one's own choices, but it can also breed a self-centered attitude and impede implementation of social justice and fairness.

To borrow an expression from Richard Rorty, such a perspective allows us to move beyond the limitation of seeing philosophical theories merely as "mirrors of nature" but as "levers." Under this point of view, theories that are incompatible under a descriptive lens may turn out to be complementary, as they may fit for different purposes and generate different excellences, along with their respective liabilities and limitations, just like different styles of art. Careful analysis of the pros and cons of these concepts in different contexts and exploration of the possibility of living a life utilizing the conceptually incompatible but practically complementary concepts is something that we philosophers inspired by Rosemont should do.

One may be tempted to call this a pragmatic perspective, but I prefer to call it a *gong-fu* perspective instead. Compared to the term "pragma" (πρᾶγμα in its Greek origin, meaning "deed" or "act"), the term *gong-fu*, understood broadly as an art of life, as the Song-Ming neo-Confucians took it, is more easily associated with the cultivation of the person. After all, how we conceive ourselves is not only a matter of choosing what actions to take, but more fundamentally what kind of person to become. In this regard, we should be thankful to Rosemont for his observation that these conceptions all have the function of "self-fulfilling prophesy" (Rosemont 2015, 67-8). We can practice deliberate one-sidedness for leading toward better *gong-fu*.

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