

# The Great Harmony: *An Essay on Man and Confucianism*❖

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the parallels between the natural, psychological, and social harmony in Alexander Pope's philosophical poem *An Essay on Man* (1733-34) and various Confucian texts. Both Pope and Confucians base psychological and social harmony on a cosmos that brings apparently contending movements towards higher uniformity, and both Pope and Confucius identify an ethical mean as the ideal of life. Popean harmony, compared with Confucian harmony, remains mechanical and isolated because Pope fails to address the possible interactions between inner and outer harmony. The similarities between Popean and Confucian harmony may be traced to the influences of Leibniz and Bolingbroke who studied Confucianism with great interest, and more probably, to the general enthusiasm for sinology in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**KEY WORDS:** Alexander Pope, Confucianism, harmony, mean

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Eighteenth-century England saw the revival of Greek and Roman ethics, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean; these schools, together with Christianity, produced a *mélange* that somewhat resembles the Confucian mean. As the most poetical declaration of the “Age of Enlightenment,” Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1733-34) has captured the major ethical assumptions of his time. Pope constructs dynamic cosmological and psychological models that bring seemingly contending forces into a higher harmony. Like Pope, Confucians put much the same emphasis on the harmonization of such opposites as *yin* (passive & female principle) and *yang* (active & male principle), reason and passion, and heavenly order and personal interest. The concept of harmony here necessitates difference or even hierarchy because sameness or absolute equality, in both Popean and Confucian contexts, would simply bring unsolvable conflicts and further lead to chaos. “Harmony” here denotes both the static coexistence of hierarchical elements and their orderly interactions.

Loathing extremisms like a Confucian, Pope seeks a middle course when confronted with divergent ethical alternatives. This kind of golden mean, or the ability to hit the right point in a specific circumstance, exhibits the ethical dimension of the concept of harmony. Pope knew of Confucius the person in fact, for in *The Temple of Fame* (1715) he praises the Eastern Master in this couplet:

Superior, and alone, *Confucius* stood,  
Who taught that useful Science, to be *good*. (107-08)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963). All the later quotations of Pope’s poems, except *An Essay on Man*, are taken from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically by the title of the poem and number of the lines.

Under these lines Pope writes in a note: “*We have scarce any Account of a moral philosopher [in the East] except Confucius, the great Lawgiver of the Chinese, who lived about two thousand Years ago*” (qtd. in Butt 176). Some questions invite thinking. Do Popean and Confucian harmonies share the same cosmological ground? How do Pope and Confucius, deal with disorder or disharmony that seems apparent in the world as well as inside the human psyche? What are the major similarities and dissimilarities between Popean and Confucian means? And more importantly, to what degree has Confucianism influenced Pope’s eclectic view on nature and man? Or, has Pope borrowed more from Aristotle, who says in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that “virtue finds, and when found adopts, the mean” (36)?

This paper indicates that both Pope and Confucians deem cosmos as a harmony out of disharmony, and both of them extend the concept of concord within discord to psychosocial and social aspects. Pope, however, neglects the complicated interactions among natural, psychosocial, and social harmony while Confucians are invariably concerned with the threading-together of the three levels. Popean harmony presupposes a mean in human reason while Confucian harmony emphasizes a mean in passion; the former remains commonsensical while the latter acquires a mystical tendency. The parallels between Pope and Confucianism may originate from the influences of Leibniz and Bolingbroke, yet more probably, from the wide circulation of Confucianism in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Cosmic Harmony and Man’s Middle Status**

Pope in the first epistle of the *Essay* builds up, if not quite innovatively, a cosmology that achieves overall harmony through partial conflicts. This dialectical concept of universe leads Pope to form an ethics that compromises

thesis and antithesis, passion and reason, Epicureanism and Stoicism. From the structure of the universe he infers a subjective prescript for human behavior. In the first place, Pope tries to base his system of ethics on metaphysics, as Pre-Qin and Han Confucians did when they began to theorize their Master's causerie on good behavior.

Unlike the pessimistic Pope who fears the eventual dominance of chaos over order in *The Dunciad* (1743), the optimistic Pope in the *Essay* considers the universe to be in a Leibnizian pre-established harmony: "All Discord, Harmony, not understood; / All partial Evil, universal Good"(II. 291-92)<sup>2</sup>. Although Pope denied that he had read Leibniz's *Theodicy* (Mack, *Twickenham* xxvii), his intellectual debt to this Continental rationalist seems obvious. Like Leibniz, Pope takes great effort to explain away the existence of evil by introducing the counterbalancing hand of God. Discords are necessary in that they mysteriously and teleologically constitute a universal harmony that only God can discern. Pope admonishes people not to criticize God for creating a world that seems imperfect. This world is as perfect as it can be; those blaming its imperfection just fail to understand the concept of harmony in a Popean or Leibnizian way. Pope asks us to "[c]ease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name / Our proper bliss depends on what we blame" (II. 281-82).

Maynard Mack thinks that Leibniz had very limited influence on Pope. He says: "the *Essay* contains nothing not derivable from other sources. And though it is possible that some of Leibniz's thought reached Pope by way of Bolingbroke or Shaftsbury, what filters into the poem, if anything, was precisely what was not characteristically Leibnizian" (*Twickenham* xxvii).

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope, *Twickenham Edition of An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1950). All the quotations in the *Essay* are taken from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically by the numbers of the epistle and lines.

Mack may have viewed Pope as an empiricist who ridicules *a priori* reasoning in *The Dunciad*: “We nobly take the high Priori Road, / And reason downward, till we doubt of God” (IV. 470-72). Pope expresses his empiricist standing more explicitly by asking “what can we reason, but from what we know?” (I. 18) Pope’s negative view on rationalists, however, does not necessarily exclude the possibility for him to form a cosmological outlook that is “characteristically Leibnizian.” In fact, Pope’s contemporaries identified the Leibnizian elements in the poem after its publication in 1733. J. P. Crousaz, a theologian, after analyzing 48 lines of the first epistle of the *Essay*, concludes that “this Consequence, which he [Pope] asserts to be as evident, he draws from Mr. Leibnitz’s System, which is, that *the infinite Wisdom of the Creator must of all possible Systems have preferred the Best . . .*” (qtd. in Barnard 301). A Frenchman called Louis Racine associated Pope implicitly with Leibniz when addressing Pope as an “abstract Reasoner, who . . . in his stolid Anglican way will reply, *All is for the best*” (qtd. in Mack, *Life* 739). The parallel between Popean and Leibnizian optimism indicates Pope’s conscious or unconscious assimilation of Leibniz’s pre-established harmony.

Leibniz, in turn, may have deduced his cosmic harmony from the study of Confucian works. French Jesuits had been indefatigably translating Confucian classics like *The Analects*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of Mean*, and sending them back to Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Leibniz, according to Fan Cunzhong, was “the first European who had studied Chinese philosophy systematically” (29). Leibniz was an ardent correspondent with Joachim Bouvet, a famous Jesuit, who had studied *Book of Changes* with great zeal. Leibniz himself was quite familiar with the key philosophical concepts of Song Confucianism such as *yin*, *yang*, *li* (principle), and *chi* (material force). He defines one of his most important philosophical concepts

“monad” as a simple substance with a soul, which comes very close to Zhang Zai’s dynamic *chi*. Not surprisingly, his pre-established harmony bears striking similarity to Zhu Xi’s organic universe, which has been explored thoroughly by Joseph Needham in *Science and Civilization in China*.

On the other hand, Pope and Leibniz’s views on the cosmos are inspired by scientific advancements in the Renaissance. The astronomers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had discovered the ratio of the planetary orbits and the laws of the motion of the planets. The intervals among the planets were in such perfect proportion that they began to perceive the universe as a harmonious and exquisite artifact of God. Annibale Romei, curiously combining Platonic Idea with Christian cosmology, wrote in a letter that:

According to this Ideall proportion therefore was the whole worlde by God created . . . and the heavenly spheres were with so great proportion framed . . . that in moving . . . they procure celestially harmony: every starre hath his proportion to receive light from the Sunne; and both the stars, and Sunne, with so great measure and proportion, doe infuse their light and heate into inferior bodies, as with marvel, and wonder from them, springeth the beutie of this inferior world. (211)

Later, Johannes Kepler confirmed this universal harmony by his famous law of the movement of the planets. Depicting the “harmonic ratios” among Venus, Mars, Earth and Sun in his “Harmonies of the World” (1619), Kepler praises God as “the source of all wisdom, the everlasting approver of order, the eternal and super-existent geyser of geometry and harmony” (56). To adopt a popular theological metaphor of the Renaissance, nature has become an exquisite watch that reflects the harmony, order, and proportion in a Divine Mind.

Apart from the Renaissance notion of general harmony, Pope nevertheless admits the existence of conflicts, the “elemental strife” in nature (I. 169). Instead of making a tediously homogeneous universe, God created a multifarious world that contains varieties starting from inanimate rocks high up to spiritual angels. Conflicts among God’s creatures break out within this heterogeneous background. Man may fight animals. Animals must destroy plants or other animals to preserve themselves. Natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions threaten man’s life from time to time. Almost everything lies in latent conflict with something else. That is why Pope replaces the “impossible harmony” (Dobrée 17) of the Renaissance with his “universal Good.”

For Pope, nature herself provides a living example of how the Divine Mind brings apparent extremes into harmony. God has his mysterious way of counterbalancing these seemingly conflicting elements, directing them towards a *telos*, a purpose. In Pope’s *Moral Essay III* (1733), God alternates summer and winter, reconciling the extremes of hotness and coldness in order to sustain life on earth:

Ask we what makes one keep, and one bestow?  
 That Pow’R who bids the ocean ebb and flow,  
 Bids seed-time, harvest, equal course maintain,  
 Thro’ reconcil’d extremes of draught and rain,  
 Builds Life on Death, on Change Duration founds,  
 And gives th’ eternal wheels to know their rounds. (165-70)

Dynamic and all-sustaining, nature’s harmony becomes Heraclitian *discordia*

*concors*, a concord within discords.<sup>3</sup> The conflicting elements in nature—draught and rain, life and death, change and duration—have been miraculously brought to a general harmony by God’s regulating hand, that “Pow’R.” Anthropomorphically, God resembles a skillful painter who draws aesthetic value out of the contrariety of black and white. “The light and shade, whose well-accorded strife,” Pope writes, “Gives all the strength and color of our life” (II. 121-22). By reconciling antithetical seasonal movements, nature, with her vast lively scenes, exemplifies an abstract harmony that dwells in God’s creative *anima*.

Nature does not only instantiate the reconciliatory tendency inherent in God, but also exhibits a hierarchal order that ordains every creature’s proper position. Pope believes that a “vast chain of being” binds every creature on an ascending ladder:

See, thro’s this air, this ocean, and this earth,  
 All matter quick, and bursting into birth.  
 Above, how high progressive life may go!  
 Around, how wide! how deep extend below!  
 Vast chain of being, which from God began,  
 Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,  
 Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see,  
 No glass can reach! from Infinite to thee,  
 From thee to Nothing! (I. 233-41)

Arthur O. Lovejoy conducted a comprehensive historical study on the chain of being, tracing the idea of cosmic plenitude and continuity to Plato and Aristotle.

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<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus wrote in *The Fragments* that “opposition brings men together, and out of discord comes the fairest harmony, and all things have their birth in strife.” See Bakewell 31.



Lovejoy points out that these lines of Pope present “man’s status as the link uniting the two great segments of the scale” (199). On this “Jacob’s ladder” that reaches heaven, each creature has its specific trait that fits it into the environment, ensuring its own survival. Pope amusingly remarks, “Why has not Man a microscopic eye? / For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly” (I. 193-94). Every creature by submitting to the decree of a benevolent God finds its own irreplaceable felicity. Like a huge machine, the whole of nature cannot function but through the well-running of each individual part; the welfare of the whole is arrived at only after every part of nature has achieved its respective Aristotelian goodness—the developing of its specialty to the full extent. This hierarchy is essential in that it maintains an order in nature, an order Augustan writers like Pope believe should be bought at any price: “All this dread ORDER break—for whom? for thee? / Vile worm!—Oh Madness, Pride, Impiety!” (I. 257-58) The appropriateness of each member’s performance in “this vast show of Nature” (Sherburn 314) becomes a rule inviolable to Pope. There is then nothing more sacrilegious than deviating from one’s proper place to covet another one’s.

Next, Pope pinpoints man’s middle status in this general map of cosmic hierarchy. Man rises above animals by the advantage of reason, but remains inferior to angels for his corporeality. Man therefore occupies some mid-point in the ladder of beings. These lines from Pope, claimed by Geoffrey Tillotson to have “no rival in the literature of man” (31), genuinely exhibit the tragic-heroic characteristics of man’s middle-ness:

Plac’d on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic’s pride,

He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,  
 In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
 In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,  
 Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;  
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
 Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;  
 Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;  
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
 Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:  
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world! (II. 3-18)

Pope presents the dual possibilities of man's elevation to be the crown of the animate and inanimate world and of his degeneration into the level of beasts. The poet holds mankind to be in the intermediate state where he has equal chance of ascending or descending. Man embodies a mean between the pure sensuality of lower creatures and the pure spirituality of incorporeal angels or God himself. Lovejoy summarizes Pope's eclecticism in these words: "of this ethics of the middle link Pope, again, was the chief . . . apostle" (201). In fact, Pope does nothing but echo Pascal who said that man is "a Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, and All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything"(17). Edward Young, a later Augustan poet and an admirer of Pope, echoes his predecessor in *Night Thoughts* (1742-44):

How passing wonder He, who made him such!  
 Who centered in our make such strange extremes!  
 From different natures, marvelously mixed;

Connexion exquisite of distant worlds!  
Distinguished link in being's endless chain!  
Midway from nothing to the Deity. (540)

Like Pope or Leibniz, Confucians present a dynamic picture of cosmic harmony too. In "On Nature," Xunzi depicts the harmonious interactions of cosmic forces in an almost identical way to Pope:

The fixed stars rotate in succession; the sun and moon shine alternately; the four seasons follow one another; yin (passive cosmic force) and yang (active cosmic force) effect their great transformations; and the wind and rain spread over all things. Each of the ten thousand things attains its harmony, and thus grows. (Chan 117-18)

Although Xunzi knew little about the precise orbital distances among the stars, intuition did not fail him in the discovery of this grand symphony in nature. *Yin* and *yang*, two antithetical yet complementing forces, operate through each other to foster life on earth. In one of the five Confucian classics *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), there is a chapter "On Music" which records the harmony in nature as:<sup>4</sup>

The earthly force ascends; heavenly ether descends. *Yin* and *yang* communicate; heaven and earth exchange their substances. Thunder, wind and rain succeed one another, and four seasons nurture everything and sun and moon warm the animate species.

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<sup>4</sup> In *LuShi Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn of Mr. Lu*), we have a similar picture of cosmic harmony: "in this month [first month of spring] the vital force of Heaven descends, the vital force of earth arises; Heaven and earth are in harmony and the grass and trees begin to burgeon" (Bary 1: 209).

This is the Music, the Harmony in nature. (Zheng 1095-96)<sup>5</sup>

The analogy of music employed by Confucians to delineate cosmic harmony comes very close to Leibniz's comparison of monads to "several different bands of musicians and choirs, playing their parts separately . . . nevertheless keep[ing] perfectly together, by each following their own notes, in such a way that he who hears them all finds in them a harmony that is wonderful" (qtd. in Stumpf 257). As for Pope, his good ear enables him to discern this grand music immediately: "Th' according music of a well-mix'd State. / Such is the World's great harmony" (III. 294-95).

Similar to Pope, Confucians locate human beings in the mid-point of the scale of beings. The triad of heaven, earth and man has been one of the worn-out themes of Confucianism in all ages. Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription," an important philosophical document for Song Confucians, begins with the statement that "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst" (Chan 497). Shao Yong in *Huangji Jingshi (The Supreme Principles Governing the World)* puts it more succinctly: "man is central in the universe" (Bary 1: 463). For Confucians, man symbolizes the quintessence of heaven and earth anthropocentrically, feeling rather comfortable in his middle place. On Pope's chain of being, however, man mechanically and somehow schizophrenically finds his proper mid-place, appearing ridiculous and puzzled. In a Popean context, heaven and earth signify the Greco-Christian dichotomy of spirit and flesh, while in the Confucian scheme man simply incarnates two creative forces, heaven and earth, *yin* and *yang*, having nothing to do with the body-mind problem. Although Pope tries hard to reconcile

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<sup>5</sup> If not otherwise indicated, the English translations are mine.

man's corporeality with spirituality, his picture of man, compared with that offered by Confucianism, presents less organic harmony.

Did Pope read *Xunzi* or the *Liji*? One cannot help wondering. Anyway, due to the increasing knowledge of Confucianism at that time<sup>6</sup>, Pope and Leibniz, as well as other European intellectuals might have been familiar with the concept of "order within disorder," which constitutes the very basis of Confucian cosmology. Pope's and the Confucians' understandings of the cosmos and man's place seem too identical to be simply dismissed as a coincidence. It is possible that Leibniz partly influenced Pope, and Leibniz himself had drawn on Confucianism through his study of the *Book of Changes*, which deals with orderly interactions between *yin* and *yang*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Psychological Harmony: Reason and Passion**

Leaving the grandiose exposition of the universe, Pope jumps into the deep recess of the human heart in the second epistle of the *Essay*. He derives the analysis of man's psyche from his conception of a well-balanced cosmos. Seeing that the external nature has an overall harmony, Pope believes there is, or should be, a similar one in human beings too. The antithetical emotions such as love and hatred, hope and fear, and joy and grief can be brought to a concord if they are "temper[ed]" and "employ[ed]" by reason (II. 113). Whether it is possible is open to question, but at any rate Pope is a poet rather than a psychoanalyst; he perhaps has done what a poet in that age could have done in cramming psychological investigations neatly and rhythmically into one couplet after another.

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of European scholars' acceptance and interpretations of Confucianism in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Fan 23-41.

<sup>7</sup> For a study on Leibniz and *Book of Changes*, see Étienne 1: 336-431.

First of all, Pope believes that man mirrors nature: “The gen’ral ORDER . . . is kept in Nature, and is kept in Man” (I. 171-72). In philosophy, of course, our poet lies closer to an amateurish synthesizer than an original discoverer. Philosophers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries generally believed that as *discordia concors* exists in nature, so it does in man. Early in the Middle Ages people viewed the human body as mirroring outer nature, it being a microcosm, a little world. Erigena, a mediaeval philosopher, believed that “man is not merely an element in the cosmos, in a sense that the reverse is true, for man is a micro-cosmos, a world writ small” (qtd. in McNerny 104). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of anatomical science, it was thought that man’s body was as complicated and intricate as nature herself. In one of his “Meditations,” John Donne, grievously distressed by sickness, likened human illness to natural disasters: “Is this the harmony which man hath by being a little world that he hath these earthquakes in himself, sudden shakings, the lightnings, sudden flushes; these thunders, sudden noises . . . these rivers of blood, sudden red waters?” (29) Donne then extended this metaphor to demonstrate the amazing knottiness of the human body through an interesting comparison between the macro world and the “little world”: “Man consists of more pieces, more parts than the world is. And if those pieces were extended and stretched out in man as they are in the world, man would be the giant and the world dwarf; the world but the map and man the world” (60). This recalls the Confucian microcosm in *Chunqiu Fanlu*, which tries to correlate every physiological component of human beings to an astronomical phenomenon.

Pope takes over the idea of “man mirroring nature” and assimilates it into his exposition of the general harmony inside man. Again like Heraclitus, he finds that the conflicts of elements inside man are exactly what give man vitality: “But ALL subsists by the elemental strife” (I. 169). He employs the painting metaphor again to illustrate the reconcilability of the fighting

passions in man's psyche:

Passions, like Elements, tho' born to fight,  
 Yet, mix'd and soften'd, in his [God's] work unite . . .  
 Suffice that Reason keep to Nature's road,  
 Subject, compound them, follow her and God.  
 Love, Hope, and Joy, fair pleasure's smiling train,  
 Hate, Fear, and Grief, the family of pain;  
 These mix'd with art, and to due bounds confin'd,  
 Make and maintain the balance of the mind:  
 The lights and shades, whose well-accorded strife  
 Gives all the strength and colour of our life. (II. 111-22)

Man has this inner harmony then, this "well-accorded strife," this micro *discordia concors* in his psyche. But the necessary condition is that reason keeps these passions within "due bounds," and to "subject" and "compound" them so as to follow "Nature's road." The "balance of the mind" results from reason's efficient management of multifarious human emotions, which join together to make man's life a choir rather than a solo, a dramatic dialogue instead of a dramatic monologue, and a symphony, if not a sonata. In a musical concert we are not drawn to any single instrument but the concord of all. Similarly, any excessive development of a single passion endangers the overall psychological equilibrium brought about by reason's assiduous balancing work.

Although Pope accepts Platonic dualism of man's reason and passion, he addresses this old dichotomy in a characteristically Popean way. He establishes a thesis and then proposes an antithesis and finally brings them under his invariable, unmistakable, and predetermined synthesis—nature. Pope identifies two antithetical principles that govern man's life, self-love and

reason. He agrees with La Rochefoucauld, an earnest proponent of *l'amour-propre* whose *Maximes* (1664) was widely read in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, that self-love “acts the soul,” providing the driving force of human life and that reason’s job is but to “check, delib’rate, and advise” (II. 59, 70). Unlike the scholastic philosophers who “teach these friends [self-love and reason] to fight” (II. 81), Pope advocates a unification of the two towards one common end, the avoidance of pain and desire of pleasure. Though there is risk of reading Pope’s seeming Epicurean statement “Pleasure their [self-love and reason] desire” (II. 88) out of context, it at least indicates Pope’s deviation from Stoicism which endeavors to extirpate all human passions. Man cannot “destroy,” the poet says, “what composes Man” (II. 114). In fact, Pope recognizes the importance of both self-love and reason in constituting a complete person. After substituting passions for self-love as the “gale” driving our sailings on “life’s vast ocean” (II. 107), Pope depicts a state where passions and reason are in harmony, the former under the direction of the latter as soldiers voluntarily obey the order of an officer in an army:

Passions, tho’ selfish, if their means be fair,  
List under Reason, and deserve her care;  
Those, that imparted, court a nobler aim,  
Exalt their kind, and take some Virtue’s name. (II. 97-100)

Passions, if moderated and “exalt[ed]” by reason, become the roots where the “nobler aim” of virtue springs from, exactly anticipating Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche: “But now hast thou only virtues: they grew out of thy passions” (53).

The most important concept in Pope’s psychology is the “ruling Passion” that “like Aaron’s serpent, swallows up the rest [passions]” (II. 132). It is this ruling passion that stabilizes a person’s character and temperament,



making one's conduct constant. This "master Passion" (II. 131) rules in vicious people like Nero and Catiline, but also operates in virtuous ones like Decius and Titus; it endows man of every trade with a unique feature, making the merchant busy, sage indolent, monk humble, and hero proud. Without it, "everybody turns out to be somebody else," just as Oscar Wilde said about the late Victorian London society (*An Ideal Husband* act.1). Pope's meaning of "ruling Passion" differs from the predominance of any single emotion; it rather denotes one's temperament that comes to completion with the maturation of the personality itself. Its meaning lies nearer to "disposition," "temper," and "individuality," than to "emotion," "passion," "feeling," etc. Seen in this light, it is easier to understand why Pope gives priority to ruling passion instead of to reason, for one's personality inevitably diffuses itself into all aspects of one's life while reason only represents one's rational faculty. This ruling passion grows strong with time: "Nature its mother, Habit is its nurse; / Wit, Spirit, Faculties, but make it worse; / Reason itself but gives it edge and pow'r" (II. 145-47). Reason, being a "weak queen" (II. 150), almost has no competence before it, for the latter strongly controls a person's character, tells one what to do in a given situation, and generally gives impetus to every action of life.

Admittedly, the ruling passion appears to be a strong power; Pope, however, believes in the cooperativeness between reason and this puissant force. Reason's job, then, is to "guard" the ruling passion. The poet writes, "Tis hers [reason's] to rectify, not overthrow, / And treat this passion more as friend than foe" (II. 163-64). If not guarded by reason, the excessive development of the ruling passion can lead to vices like that of Nero and Catiline. Though unable to control one's temperament, reason at least can give an act of will to choose to do good, channeling the torrent of the life power towards a virtuous end. The same "fiery soul" rules in Curtius and Catiline,

but one has reason as “God within the mind” (II. 199, 204) while the other has but self-love; thus one would be remembered as a great patriot while the other a notorious conspirator.

Virtue itself, as our poet believes, consists but in a harmonious mixture of the ruling passion and the guarding reason. In the notes to Pope’s *Essay*, Mack cites several illuminating passages on the relationships between virtue, passion and reason. For example, Coeffeteau wrote in *The Table of Human Passions* (1621) that “the striuings of virtue consistes not wholly to roote all naturall Passions out of the soule, but to moderate and gouern them by the rule of reason” (Mack, *Twickenham* 69). John Milton said in *Areopagitica* (1644) almost the same, “Wherefore did he create passions within us, pleasures round about us, but that these rightly tempered are the very ingredient of virtue?” (Mack, *Twickenham* 69). A. Le Grand wrote in *Government of the Passions* (1704) that, “there is no passion in our Souls, which may not be advantageously managed by Reason . . . Hatred may be brought to a just Indignation . . . Desires moderated are so many good Assistance, to acquire Virtue. Eschewing is the proper security of Chastity . . . Fear is serviceable to Prudence, and Boldness to Valour . . . So that our salvation depends only upon the good use of our passion” (Mack, *Twickenham* 77). What these authors commonly emphasize is the transformability of passion into virtue under the effective management of reason, which helps people avoid the excess of a certain passion and prescribes a mean that constitutes both Aristotelian and Confucian virtue. Pope’s ruling passion, for its difference from and superiority to the “passions” cited above, is reconciled with reason in a way that reason does not directly rule over passion, for reason is a “weak queen” here, but with the exercise of self-will attends and corrects the development of ruling passion, preventing it from growing into vice. Reason does not overthrow, as Pope says, but only rectifies, just as a

conscientious minister advises his king whenever he senses that his king is making a wrong decision. The minister is ruled by the king but also helps to rule *with* the king. If the ruling passion is an Agamemnon, the supreme lord, then reason is something like a Nestor, the indispensable counselor.

Does Pope's "guarding reason" have an Oriental source? We know that Lord Bolingbroke, Pope's "guide, philosopher and friend," had read Confucianism extensively. Bolingbroke found much support for deism by studying the "natural region" in China and especially, by reading or misreading Confucius. He describes Chinese people as "observ[ing] the order of nature, and from thence deduc[ing] all the rules of private morality and public policy" (4: 195). Bolingbroke was quick to discover the rationalistic principle in Confucius: "That reason should preside over passion, was the great rule of life, and to walk according to it, was to walk in the great high way of life" (4: 195). Bolingbroke's interpretation of Confucius, of course, suits his own belief in man's reason very well. He fails to notice that Confucius did not say "reason should preside over passion"; it is Song Confucians who emphasized this point most keenly. Is it possible that Bolingbroke transmitted the Confucian principle of "reason presiding over passion" to Pope? We know that they held long philosophical conversations and Pope drew heavily on Bolingbroke's views in his *Essay*, but what they actually said to each other, we do not know for certain (Mack, *Twickenham* xxix). Whether they talked about Confucius or Confucians' "reason presiding over passion" remains a mystery, but Pope's insistence on the rectifying effect of reason coincides with the Confucian belief that when various feelings (pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy for example) are aroused, we can reach a psychological harmony only if "all [the passions] attain due measure and degree" (Chan 98). This quotation from the beginning of *The Doctrine of Mean* illustrates Confucian psychology as a process of ordering and

reordering of multifarious passions. Recognizing the due importance of human emotion, early Confucians, like Pope, favor the managing effect of reason instead of its authoritarian supremacy.

Incorporating passion as an indispensable part into his ethics, Pope shows himself to be a compromiser of two antithetical philosophical schools prevalent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Stoicism and Epicureanism. The Greek and Roman Stoics believed that a Divine Mind governs nature and imprints its own image on man; reason itself alone is the only way God gives man to participate in divinity. To live according to nature, as their first ethical doctrine goes, is to live a life governed by reason. They deemed passion as the devil that disturbs the tranquility of mind, which they seemed to value above almost everything in the world. They believed that virtue is “self-sufficient” (Cicero 14), the end, the *telos*, of all human actions, and it consists in nothing else but reason, the endowment of the divine providence.

Stoicism had been remarkably influential throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the intellectual and literary circles of England. During the Restoration there appeared many English translations of Roman Stoics, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, and A. R. Humphrey’s remark that “Stoicism was revived” seems no exaggeration (84). This philosophy of internal tranquility saw its manifestations in major 18<sup>th</sup>-century writers. Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) sarcastically considered the horses, the Houyhnhnms, to be much superior to mankind, because these horses have the “grand maxim” of “cultivating reason” (205). Indeed, Houyhnhnms are good students of Stoicism, for they have almost completely extirpated emotions of any sort. When some of them are dying, their family and friends would “express neither joy nor grief at their departure” (207). Later, Samuel Johnson in his *Ramblers* (No. 32, 47) also addressed the doctrines of Stoicism. Although Johnson doubts the efficacy of Stoicism in real life, he admits the

importance of a tranquil mind in enduring pain, which he takes to be a larger composite of life than enjoyments.

Epicurean hedonists preach just the contrary. The followers of Epicurus believed that pleasure is the only criterion for human virtue.<sup>8</sup> They rejected the idea that nature is governed by some intelligent Divine Mind; instead, they thought it is composed of atoms that are forever in motion and in collision with each other. There is no transcendental God who sets an ethical standard for the human race; man only needs to do whatever it pleases him to do, and that is the sole standard for all morality. In an atheistic world, “man is condemned to be free” (Sartre 371). Epicureanism had many followers in Charles II’s time, the lechery of the court being a familiar fact for students of English literature. The opening lines of Earl of Rochester’s *Ramble in St. James Park* (1680) serve a pertinent example:

Much wine had poured, with grave discourse  
Of who fucks who, and who does worse  
(Such as you usually do hear  
From those that diet at the Bear),  
When I, who still take care to see  
Drunkenness relieved by lechery,  
Went out into St. James’s Park  
To cool my head and fire my heart. (1-8)

This ancient tenet of pleasure’s supremacy has its typical modern literary reproduction in Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890), in which the

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<sup>8</sup> Epicurus himself would be angry if we call him an Epicurean in the sense we use the word today. In fact, he defines “pleasure” as “the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul” (Arrington 97). Like a Stoic, Epicurus values the tranquility of mind. He could be called a “negative Epicurean” at most.

young and beautiful hero makes a magic agreement with his portrait to retain the unfading beauty of the youth. He therefore lives a debauched life, while his picture grows old and ugly, bearing the burden of his sin. Laughing at the rigid asceticism of the Stoics, Epicureans teach one to follow one's unmistakable passion because it is painful, they think, to try to draw meaning out of the ephemeral human life through arduous reasoning. Utterly pessimistic of human existence, they indulge themselves in sensual appetites: "And Lip to Lip it murmur'd—while you live / Drink!—for once dead you never shall return" (Khayyam 48).

Pope's repudiations of Stoicism and Epicureanism go side by side in the beginning of the second epistle of the *Essay*. He juxtaposes the two schools to show their respective deficiency in providing a satisfactory answer to the question of human happiness: "He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest; / In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast; / In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer" (II. 7-9). In the fourth epistle Pope goes on to ridicule these two schools:

Ask of the Learn'd the way? The Learn'd are blind,  
 This bids to serve, and that to shun mankind;  
 Some place the bliss in action, some in ease,  
 Those call it Pleasure, and Contentment these;  
 Some sunk to Beasts, find pleasure end in pain;  
 Some, swell'd to Gods, confess ev'n Virtue vain;  
 Or indolent, to each extreme they fall,  
 To trust in ev'rything, or doubt of all. (IV. 19-25)

Pope pictures two extremes that ancient Greek philosophers offered as possible ways to reach the *summum bonum*, and finds both of them dissatisfactory. The Stoics, wanting to root out all feelings and passions as

disturbances of the mind, advocate a state of apathy, of “ease” and “Contentment.” But Pope thinks their virtue is static, impassive, and “fix’d as in a frost” (II. 102); like a flower that grows up in the greenhouse inexperienced of weather, it is both artificial and vulnerable. On the contrary, Pope’s ideal of virtue embraces motion and exercise: “But strength of mind is Exercise, not Rest” (II. 104). Pope holds in contempt those Stoic philosophers who “discourse like angels, but live like men” (80), just the same whom Samuel Johnson ridiculed in his *Rasselas* (1759). In Johnson’s story, an old Stoic preaches imperviousness of mind to outside accidents, but when his own daughter dies, he throws away his philosophy and pines away like any normal person. For Pope, Stoics rush to an extreme that is both impossible and unnecessary: impossible because life experiences tell us that one cannot eradicate all the emotions (e.g. sympathy and tenderness) out of one’s breast; unnecessary because although there is pleasure in rigorous reasoning as Stoics often enjoy, in simple eating and drinking there is unmistakable pleasure too. Pope’s friend John Gay, the author of the *Beggar’s Opera* (1728), knew how to laugh before pretentious philosophy and was said by Congreve to be a jovial Epicurean: *edit, ergo est*—he eats, therefore he is (qtd. in Mack, *Life* 187). Being a dilettante of philosophy like Gay, Pope does not seem to live according to any rigid ascetic doctrines, no matter Stoic or Christian. He is a man who first knows how to live, and then how to write poetry, and lastly, how to form a systematical moral philosophy. He is no Plotinus who is ashamed of having a body, no Zeno who deems sensual pleasure as perversion. Pope’s disagreement with Stoics is further intensified by the Stoics’ pretension to “swell to Gods” in bragging of their virtue, because it violates his belief of the chain of being, the hierarchical order of animal, man and angel. In a word, Pope discredits, if not wholly rejects, Stoicism for its extreme emphasis on the exclusion of human passions.

Pope deals with Epicureanism in almost the same manner as he does with Stoicism. By claiming that “Pleasure, or wrong or tightly understood, / Our greatest evil, or our greatest good” (II. 91-92), Pope shakes off his seeming alliance with Epicureans, who identify pleasure as unquestionable goodness. Moreover, Pope denounces the Epicurean slogan “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,” for this way of living simply reduces mankind into the mere level of beasts. If Stoics relapse into intellectualism as the deists once did, then Epicurean hedonists go to the opposite of pure animalism. The “restless activities of satisfying animal appetite” (133), as Martin Price offers as the explanation of Epicurean “action,” fail to procure happiness for many people, because “for most of us (most of the time), tomorrow does roll around” (Arrington 96). Nature has given each of us a mind, so it is *natural*<sup>9</sup> for us to make due use of it. It takes not only the body, but body and mind together, to make a human being. Even though Pope admits the dominance of the “ruling Passion,” he always emphasizes the correcting effect of reason.

Pope’s emphasis on virtue seems to coincide with the Stoic proclamation of virtue’s self-sufficiency: “Virtue alone is Happiness below” (IV. 310); however, Pope’s concept of virtue lies closer to Aristotle than to Zeno or Cicero. Aristotelian *mean* comprises both Stoics’ “reason as virtue” and Epicureans’ “sensuality as virtue,” if Epicureans admit any virtue at all. This *mean* includes both the importance of reason, as long as it does not lead to the neglect of the body, and the importance of emotion, as long as it is moderated and kept appropriate under a specific situation. Pope seems to have read Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the manuscript Pope wrote beside line 111-22 of the second epistle of his Essay: “Arits. Eth. 1.7 reduces all ye passions under pleasure and pain as their universal principles. The *mean* between opposite

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<sup>9</sup> I am using the word “natural” in the Renaissance sense, meaning pious, dutiful. See Lewis 43.



passions makes virtue, ye Extremes vice” (Mack, *Twickenham* 69). In the preface to his *Essay* Pope stated his intention of composing this didactical poem: “if I could flatter my self that this *Essay* has any merit, it is in steering betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite, in passing over terms utterly unintelligible, and in forming a temperate yet not inconsistent, and a short yet not imperfect system of Ethics” (Mack, *Twickenham* 7). Pope thus steers between the spirituality of angels and the sensuality of animals, between reason and passion, and between Stoicism and Epicureanism. Like Confucians who harmonize *yin* and *yang*, Pope emphasizes the complementariness, rather than the contradictoriness, of reason and passion, preaching a holistic philosophy that recognizes both thesis and antithesis. Stoicism and Epicureanism, despite their indubitable influences on Pope and his contemporaries, fail to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of *summum bonum* of man’s life simply for their extremisms. Happiness, as Pope sees it, consists in temperance in reason, passion, and actions. Gay was an Epicurean; Swift a Stoic; and Pope, their best friend, a naturalist.

### **Two Views on an Ethical Mean**

From the beginning to the end in his poetry, Pope extols the mean as a practical virtue and the ideal of life. In *Windsor-Forest* (1713), he conceives a happy life as “. . . observ[ing] a Mean, be to himself a Friend, / To follow Nature, and regard his End” (251-52). In his *Second Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated* (1734), Pope tells his friend Huge Bethel that “’Tis yet in vain, I own, to keep a pother / About one Vice, and fall into the other: / Between Excess and Famine lies a mean; / Plain, but not sordid; tho’ not splendid, clean” (45-48). In the conversational *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated* (1733), Pope shows his aversion to political and

religious extremisms: “. . . term me which you will, / Papist or Protestant, or both between, / Like good *Erasmus* in an honest Mean, / In Moderation placing all my Glory, / While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory” (65-68). How much like *The Doctrine of Mean* these verses read! Only that they wear the mask of rhymes and rhythms. In Pope’s aesthetic works the eulogy for the mean is not less salient. In *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) Pope advises writers to “[a]void *Extremes*; and shun the Fault of such / Who still are pleas’d *too little* or *too much*” (384-85), and an ideal critic should be “Modestly bold, and Humanly severe” (636). In eating and drinking, the mean is also indispensable. In the fourth epistle of the *Essay*, Pope declares that “all the good that individuals find . . . / Lie in three words, Health, Peace, and Competence. / But Health consists in Temperance alone” (80-83).

Like Pope, Confucius emphasizes the mean—neither too much of this nor too much of that—as a cardinal virtue. The good qualities of a Chinese gentleman include: loyalty to feudal lords, piety to parents, trustfulness to friends, etc., but according to Confucius, “an ethical mean certainly can distinguish a *junzi* (exemplary person) from a base person” (Zheng 1424). This quotation from *The Mean*, the manifesto of Confucian ethical eclecticism, suffices to indicate what place the doctrine of the middle-way occupies in Confucianism, for an “exemplary person” comes only next to Confucius’s highest ethical standard *shengren* (sage). In *The Analects* Confucius talks about the mean twice. One is in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter in which the Master exclaims that “[p]erfect is the virtue which is according to the Constant Mean” (Waley 72). Another is in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter in which Confucius says that “if I cannot have a man who pursues a middle course to associate with, then I have to be content with having either an ardent or a cautious one” (Waley 166). Then it is manifest that Confucius gives preference to the middle-course taker. Unlike Robert Frost who only sees two roads of life and considers that either of them

must be taken, Confucius believes there is *tertium quid*, a third way between the thesis and antithesis. But Confucius just transmits this moderate ethics instead of creating it. In *Shangshu (Book of History)*, King Shun tells his successor Yu to follow the middle way: “Man’s moral is declining and the *tao* is hard to grasp, you must follow the middle way diligently and perseveringly” (Kong 94).

Concerning the application of mean to reason and passion, Pope and Confucianism offer very different pictures. Pope, strangely enough, gives more warnings to the excessive development of man’s reason. He is not only an active advocator, but also a sensible critic of the Age of Reason, by which literary historians conveniently and often wrongly wrap up the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Pope fears man’s excessive use of reason more than he laughs at the lack of it. Like John Dryden, who says “man is to believe / Beyond what sense and reason can conceive” (*Hind and Panther* 263-64), Pope advocates a mean in the application of reason that prevents it from prying into the mysteries of the transcendental. Reason is powerful and indispensable, Pope thinks, as long as it is confined to the secular matters of which man can obtain empirical knowledge. “The proper study of Mankind” (II. 2) excludes the supernatural and the mysterious workings of God; it directs people’s attention from the “above” to the “below,” from the Neo-Platonic contemplation to the practical business of the world. Our happiness consists in what we can make out of *this* world, just as Nietzsche once proclaimed. “The bliss of Man,” Pope writes, “is not to act or think beyond Mankind” (I. 189-90), and “in Pride, in reas’ning Pride, our error lies” (I. 123).

Pope’s conservative attitude towards science reveals his anxiety on the excessive stretching of human reason to the degree of presumptuousness. In spite of the famous epitaph on Newton’s tomb: “Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in the Night. / God said, *let Newton be*, and ALL was *Light*,” Pope worries

that the overdevelopment of reason and science could swell out man's pretension to usurp God's directing power in the symphony of the universe:

Go, wond'rous creature! mount where Science guides,  
 Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;  
 Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,  
 Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun . . .  
 Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—  
 Then drop in to thyself, and be a fool. (II. 19-22, 29-30)

Pope's skepticism of science excludes him from the label "Enlightenment writers" who believe in the omnipotence of ratiocination in finding out an answer to every question of life. Pope's stance is clear: human reason shall not and also shall be unable to touch the things that are purposefully hidden by God. There are limits to reason prescribed by nature, and man needs to know when and where to stop, for "*Fools*" may "rush into where *Angels* fear to tread" (*An Essay on Criticism* 625).

Pope may have reason to worry about such Faustian intellectual-maniacs after a long tradition of speculative philosophy, but to Chinese Confucians it is the none-heard-of. The Chinese side of the story is almost the opposite of Pope's. Confucians do not fear so much an excess of reason as an excess of passion or instinctual desires. According to Confucius and his followers, a Chinese is born an Epicurean instead of a Stoic. Therefore they give more warnings to man's overflowing of his passions than to his reason. In *Ancient Chinese Poems* it is recorded: "How is the Great *tao* lost? By indulging one's desires!" (Shen 5) There is more the color of Confucianism than Taoism in this antediluvian epithet. Taoists, like Stoics or ascetics, take all human passion to be evil—witness a proverbial description of a Taoist in *Chuang-tzu*

whose body resembles “dry wood” and whose mind, “dead ashes” (Chan 179). Confucius would agree that “by nature we desire food and sex” (*Mencius* 6A: 4); the Master is everything except an ascetic. Passion has its legitimacy as long as it is not “indulged.” But in Confucius’s time, the Spring and Autumn Period, it was often indulged, and the debauchery in the feudal court could compete with that of Charles II’s reign in England. Confucius decides to correct the time which is “out of joint” (Shakespeare, *Ham.*1.5.118). His own personal behavior, of course, is above criticism. When out of pure business he went to see Miss Nan, a *ravisante* yet infamous belle, his disciple Zilu suspected him of impure intentions. Confucius poured out his heart by swearing that “if I have any impure intention in that, let me be anathematized by Heaven!” (Waley 72)<sup>10</sup> W. E. Soothill’s comment that “his [Confucius’s] power of self-control was admirable” seems no exaggeration (26). In *The Analects*, Confucius’s general admonition to a young man is, not surprisingly, the abstinence from women (16: 7).

Then we have two interpretations of the mean. Pope discourages our pretentious effort to climb higher on the chain of being, to “aspire to be Angels” (I. 28), or to try to assume what Satan once coveted: “GOD of GOD” (I. 122), while Confucius tries to prevent us from slipping down on the ladder of being, from degenerating into the level of barbarians or even beasts. Pope has as much apprehension for the dangerous ascent of human nature as Confucius does the descent of it. However, we may assuredly classify both Pope and Confucius’s concept of mean as humanistic. When we come to the further development of the mean in some of Confucius’s disciples, we are

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<sup>10</sup> Lin Yutang dramatized this interesting scene into a comedy *The Master Visits Nanzi* during the New Literature Movement in the 1920s. In the play Confucius’s pedantry and problematic asceticism are put into sharp contrast with Nanzi’s vitality and open-mindedness towards the contact between men and women. This disparaging presentation of Confucius is quite consistent, of course, with the iconoclastic zeal at that time. See Lin, *Selected Works* 285-305.

surprised that it is hardly the same thing as what their Master once said, and the label “humanistic” becomes both inadequate and inaccurate. From there the dividing line between Popean and Confucian mean is permanently drawn.

According to the Popean concept of chain of being, man occupies the mid-level between angels and animals, being a mixture of spirituality and sensuality. Therefore, Pope infers that man’s proper study is man, and that man’s reason should not probe into the transcendental but be limited to the empirical. Man’s felicity exists in his observation of an ethical mean. It should be noted that although Pope derives his mean from a harmonious cosmos and tells us to follow nature, he never says that we should *participate* in the making and unmaking of the objective world like a hand of that “*unendliche Natur*” (Goethe 1: 30). To Pope, following nature lies in modeling human conduct on regularity, moderation and harmony in nature; we only need to make the best out of what Mother Nature endows us with—reason and passion, spirituality and sensuality, and to reconcile these antagonistic forces in our breasts towards a noble aim. “Modeling heaven” does not mean “unity of heaven and human beings.” Pope satirizes those who “walk on air and contem-plate the Sun” (Aristophanes 292), refuting Neo-Platonic mysticism altogether:

Go, soar with Plato to the empyreal sphere,  
To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;  
Or tread the mazy round his followers trod,  
And quitting sense call imitating God;  
As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,  
And turn their heads to imitate the sun.  
Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—  
Then drop in to thyself, and be a fool! (II. 23-30)

Popean mean becomes paradoxical—it is drawn from outside nature, yet at the same time prevents man from uniting with nature. Once Pope’s ethics is delivered from the womb of Mother Nature, it becomes a rebellious child and claims autonomy. It of course has the vital quality of the Mother—a micro-harmony that contains antithetical forces, but it has nothing to do with the mystery of the First Cause. It makes man content with the happiness afforded by the simple things of this world (moderate eating, drinking, reading and thinking for example) instead of urging him to delve into the innermost secret of creation—only see in what a tragedy Dr. Faust ends! That poor discontented scholar started yearning for entrance into the highest mystical empyrean of God but ended in weltering in the ever-burning sulfur of the deepest hell. This is perhaps what Pope fears most. To “contem-plate the Sun” leads to either the greatest good or the greatest evil, and unfortunately there is no *tertium quid*. Pope would rather give up the overwhelming rapture of uniting with the One than run the risk of losing the ready pleasure provided by common sense. As Pope said, we must learn to walk before we can dance, so we must learn to be humans before we can be Gods. The Popean mean turns out to be purely humanistic; it separates us from the mystical unity with the “plastic Nature” (III. 9), confines us to the empirical world and tells us to look up to heaven with a sense of awe instead of curiosity. Pope asks: “From brutes what men, from men what spirits know / Or who could suffer Being here below?” (I. 79-80)

Interestingly, the Chinese version of the mean after Confucius exhorts man to know the “spirits” which both Pope and Confucius deny to be knowable.<sup>11</sup> After Confucius’s death, the theories of Lao-tzu and Mozi had taken great hold among the intellectuals, which made Confucius’s disciples

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<sup>11</sup> Xunzi stands out as an exception. He thinks that it is fruitless to seek out omens and spirits in nature.

anxious that their Master's philosophy was human, all too human. In his "Postscript to Gu Hongming's English Translation of *The Mean*," Wang Guowei points out that "Confucius does not talk about metaphysics, but why does the author of *The Mean* adventure to do it? Because Zisi finds it so urgent and is compelled to do so" (149). Wang continues to explain that Zisi, seeing both Taoism and Moism claim to follow heaven, "worries that his Master's teaching may be baseless, and thus hurries to set up a metaphysics to solidify his Master's ethics and politics" (150).

In order to activate the mean, Confucians encourage people to merge themselves into the grand symphony of nature, to communicate with the Divine by participating in its creating process, and to identify the micro mean with the macro. *Cheng* (sincerity) is highlighted as a necessary step to reach this unity. The author of *The Mean* says that "sincerity is the way of heaven. Man studies arduously to obtain that sincerity; thus it is the way of man. A sincere man obtains the mean without much thinking and effort—he can even be called a sage" (Zheng 1446). And then we come to one of the most important Confucian texts: "Only a man with complete sincerity under heaven can make the best out of his nature; he can further give full development to the nature of other men; and further to the natures of all things; he is even able to participate in the creation of heaven and earth, being their equal" (Zheng 1448). Moved by mystical empathy with nature, man achieves full development of personality and is able to give completion to the myriad things in the world.

Confucius's expression of the mean, like Pope's, is down-to-earth and easily graspable, having nothing of that aerial tincture, while his follower Zisi, like a Neo-Platonist, reaches heaven with a single jump. Confucius is too agnostic to openly talk of "prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits" (Waley 82). But some of his followers can hardly refrain from doing



so<sup>12</sup>—only witness Dong Zhongshu who explains all human relations in the term of *yin*, *yang* and the Five Agents (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), nearly to the degree of superstition. Dong further develops an elaborate system of “unity of heaven and human beings” that resembles very much “the spiritual marriage of the soul with God” talked about by Augustine Poulain (qtd. in Johnston 27). Chinese Confucians differ from Pope in that, for them, “modeling heaven” naturally and necessarily leads to the “unity of heaven and human beings.” Confucians continue where Pope stops; where Pope fears to tread, Confucians boldly rush in. We can take what Pope says—“He knows to live, who keeps the middle state, / And neither leans on this side, nor on that”—at its face value. It is unwrapped of that mysterious cloud which covers much of Confucian concept of the mean. For the latter we are tempted to dip deeper than the surface and are justified to do so. The Confucian mean is both commonsensical and mystical, plain and deep. In *The Mean* it is said that “though the way of the exemplary person is wide, it is at the same time secret. Ordinary people can know something of it, but its ultimate cause even a sage fails to fathom. Average people are able to practice it, but its full use even a sage cannot exhaust” (Zheng 1428). This inexhaustible mean, despite its operative, practical effect in people’s daily life, acquires a deified dimension. Like St. Paul’s goal of “being made perfect” by God, it functions in common people but at the same time lies above them as a sacred tenet.

Mystical unity, however, comes rather at the end, not at the beginning, of a long process of studying, thinking and self-cultivation that directs one to achieve sincerity to both oneself and other people. Different from Pope who does not tell us how to achieve the mean, Confucians urgently stress self-cultivation as the way to sagehood. Through learning, thinking, reflecting

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<sup>12</sup> Xunzi holds a naturalistic, pragmatic view on the relationship between *tian* (nature) and humanity.

and practicing for a long time, one gets closer to the mean, to what is most human. For Confucians, to be human is to recognize the creative forces of heaven and earth and to identify oneself with the harmony between them. By uniting with heaven, one enlarges one's mind, discards selfishness and treats other people with a loving heart, just as heaven nurtures all living things with a benevolent heart. The Confucian mean rises above the Popean mean by its combination of both idealism and practicability.

### ***Li* , Social Harmony, Interaction between Self and Other**

Since only a sage can attain mystical communication with heaven by bringing himself into macrocosmic harmony, Confucians offer a workable norm to enable common people to reach psychological and social harmony. Social harmony here means: first, the non-conflicting existence of two or more people who may hold different interests; second, appropriate social behavior that directs the *self* towards the consideration of the *other*. This is where *li* (rites, propriety) comes in. The requirement for social decorum persists in ancient China on many levels, from eating and drinking to ascendance of an emperor, from person and family to the country as a whole. It includes not only a complicated code for appropriate conduct, but also the social hierarchy itself in feudal China. For instance, in the spring plowing ceremony, the emperor, the minister, and officials high and low would plow different numbers of plots according to their rank. In invoking the gods and commemorating the ancestors, which are another two essential ceremonies, there also exists this kind of order. Confucius condemns those sacrifices performed without due respect to order as sacrilegious. *Li* then helps Chinese people locate their proper places in society and live peacefully together, serving as the medium through which they express their respect for the living

and dead.

As to its origin, Confucians believe *li* springs from the need to reconcile our ancestors' conflicting needs and desires. According to Xunzi, *li* regulates man's desires and brings them within a certain limit in order to avoid what Thomas Hobbes calls a state where "every man is enemy to every man" (103). Unlike Mencius who thinks that man's nature is beneficent, Xunzi takes it to be evil, aggressive and covetous, maintaining that any goodness in man is achieved through self-cultivation. The limited resources of nature will run dry under men's grasping hands. The saintly kings like Yao and Shun, seeing that men fight each other over material benefits and bring war to the state, set up certain regulations and rites to distribute goods among their people, making the human species appear more decent and civilized. Ancient people followed *li* not only because it prevented excess, but because *li* brought them aesthetic enjoyments. Ouyang Xiu, a Song essayist, poet and scholar, recalls the good ritual system of Yao and Shun and the Three Dynasties in his *Essays on Fundamentals (Benlun)*: ". . . the rules for supporting and bidding farewell to the dead were all made to accord with the desires of the people. They were brightened with ceremonial objects and beautifully ordered so that they were a delight to the people and easy to carry out. They were in harmony with the nature and feelings of the people . . ." (Bary 1: 388).

In the Western Han, Dai Sheng, a Confucian scholar, put this social etiquette in what we today see as the *Liji*. It contains numerous practical directions on appropriate conduct. Though *li* may seem unnecessarily hairsplitting to modern readers, Han Confucians argue that it is well-grounded because it models the divine order in nature:

Just as heaven is exalted above earth, so is a king above his subjects, and so are what is noble or humble made manifest . . .

Each animal and plant has its proper nature and species, not interfering with another one. Stars shine in heaven while mountains decorate the earth. Hence *li* does nothing but copy the order in nature. (Zheng 1094-95)

*Li* patterns human society on the unmistakable heavenly order which later Song Confucians, like Greek and Roman Stoics, deem as the *logos*. Social hierarchy then is justified to be natural, in the sense that it is natural for the heaven to rise above the earth. Ancient politicians even treated *li* as the guarantee of *tao*, the highest good. Without *li*, as Yan Yin said, “people are lost, and *tao* is at peril” (20). *Li* acquires its transcendental prototype in this interpretation.

Similar to the author of *Liji*, Pope thinks that there is or should be a chain of power in a society that resembles the chain of being in nature, which reminds us of Plato’s definition of political moderation as “the better rules the worse” in *The Republic* (1: 694). Pope, believing that “all Nature’s difference keeps all Nature’s peace” (IV. 56), takes social hierarchy to be a *discordia concors*, again!

’Till jarring int’rests of themselves create  
Th’ according music of a well-mix’d State.  
Such is the World’s great harmony, that springs  
From Order, Union, full Consent of things! (III. 293-96)

Social unity does not mean indiscriminate equality or coordination; on the contrary, it demands division and subordination of power. In Pope’s utopia, tyranny is by and large excluded on the base of a “well-mix’d” regime where power is balanced among different governmental officials. “Order” makes

every official aware of the scope and limit of his power, while “Union” makes one willingly and conscientiously subordinate to one’s superior. “Act well your part,” Pope writes, “there all the honor lies” (IV. 194). Social propriety functions as a general principle to maintain the stability of hierarchy, forestalling abuse of power and the possibility of totalitarianism. In this scheme, “bliss is the same in subject or in a king,” although “ORDER is Heav’n’s first law” and “some are, and must be, greater than the rest,” (IV. 56, 49-50). In a world of social stability every person, though coming from different walks of life, “has his share” of pleasure; and “who would more obtain, / Shall find, the pleasure pays not half the pain” (IV. 47-48). Politically or socially people may be unequal, but in happiness of life they are not necessarily so.

Pope’s inadequacy lies in that between social harmony and one’s inner harmony, there seems little connection. Pope does not answer how a social order is internalized in man’s nature to regulate his outward behavior. He only says that outside “laws” would “restrain” a person, but we are at a loss as to the psychological process involved in the controlling of “ambition, lucre, [and] lust” (III. 269-70). But if we investigate Confucian *li* further, we find a relatively satisfactory depiction on the relationship between outward social propriety and man’s inward harmony. Song Yu’s “On the Lasciviousness of Dengtuzi” provides an interesting example for analysis:

Zhang Hua, an official from state Qin, said, “when I was young I had traveled to many places. . . . When spring was over and summer followed, birds sang sweetly and lots of belles came to pick the fruits of mulberry. They walked in beauty and their faces shone forth like the sun. I watched the most beautiful one among them, beginning to recite a love poem. . . . She seemed to

be looking in my way but did not step to me; later she seemed to come to me as if trying to find me. I recited the love poem again. Her heart and mine echoed each other through murmurings and depended on each other through platonic admirations. My eyes longed for her beauty, but my heart worried about righteousness. I repeated the poem and finally brought myself to *li*, having done nothing that I would regret. (82)

Although far from prescribing asceticism, Confucian *li* sometimes necessitates hard battles between heavenly order and human desires, an antithesis originating in Xunzi and highlighted in Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. Zhang Hua, a man versed in and well-regulated by social propriety *li*, after a long series of bitter sweet considerations and reconsiderations, finally succeeds in controlling himself and regains inward harmony. The word “finally” tells the whole story of a subtle psychological battle between passion and “righteousness,” and the last few words “having done nothing that I would regret” denote unmistakably a psychological equilibrium. From the end of story, we learn that *li* is more about sublimating than subjugating human passion. *Li* operates within Zhang’s psyche, directing his emotion to nobleness instead of to impulsive actions. He did not feel restrained by *li* at the end because he had obtained greater satisfaction from behaving rationally and appropriately before other people. As Tu Wei-ming suggests, *li* transforms and elevates man through bringing the *other* into the *self* and through a dynamic process of humanization (17-34). Confucius would ask: “A man who is not humane, what has he to do with *li*?” (*Analects* 3: 3) *Li* helps Zhang to be humane in this public event, bringing him ease and comfort out of the resistance of temptation.

When we read Pope’s depiction of social propriety in the *Essay*, we find

that it falls short of psychological insight; Pope's harmonious mixture of human passion and social order is too easily attained to be creditable. Pope just gives us the final result of a reconciled psychological state brought about by the consideration of "safety," without telling us how human reason manages to curb the "ambition, lucre, lust" (III. 269-70) and whether reason has further sublimated these passions or not. Is Pope's reconciliation of the social propriety and personal passion successful? We can only hope—see his anguished *Eloisa* who is split alive by virtue and passion in *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717)! Readers may find Pope's depiction serious and Song's playful, but Song Yu presents us a clearer picture of the reconciliation between human desire and the internalized social *li*. Pope has plenty of the apophthegms of a moral teacher but lacks the acuteness of a psychologist that abounds in Song Yu. Although for Pope there are harmonies in man's psyche as well as in outside society, he fails to probe into the complicated interactions between them. Thus Pope's social harmony seems to be independent from man's inner harmony while Confucians believe they are inalienable—social etiquette helps to bring inner harmony by sublimating personal passion, and conversely, when one bears *li* in one's heart, one succeeds in relating to other people in an appropriate manner.

To conclude, both Pope and Confucians draw harmony out of disharmony in nature, in society, and in man, but Pope's account of psychological harmony seems more isolated because he disassociates inner harmony with cosmic and social harmony. Confucians emphasize a mean in man's animal desires which prevents him from slipping down on the chain of being and later elevates him to sagehood through a unity of man and heaven. Man's inner harmony also interacts with the requirements of social propriety through a complex process of reconciliation of instinctual desires and internalized *li*. Thus the personal, social and natural harmonies are all miraculously threaded together in

Confucianism. Man becomes the subject who brings all the relationships in nature and in society, visible or invisible, manifest or obscure, commonsensical or occult, into his microcosm to “participate in the creation of Heaven and Earth.”

Pope may or may not have read Confucian texts like *The Doctrine of Mean*, *Xunzi* or *The Analects*, but the similarities between the *Essay* and Confucianism appear on more than one level. Pope was a man of wide reading and intellectual interest; given the European zeal for sinology in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Pope in fact did not need to read many Confucian texts to grasp the basic principles of this Eastern philosophy. Leibniz and Bolingbroke, even his intimate friend Swift, studied sinology more or less. It is likely that Pope had just borrowed from Confucius, if indirectly, as he had drawn on Heraclitus, Aristotle, Leibniz, and Bolingbroke directly. Pope’s admiration for Confucius, “the great lawgiver of the Chinese,” may have deeper roots than just courteous praise.

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# 大道中庸：《論人》與儒家

馮冬\*

## 摘 要

亞歷山大·蒲柏的哲學長詩《論人》(1733)與中國儒家文本間存在諸多類似，本文擬從自然、心理及社會三方面加以研討。對於蒲柏與儒家，不論人類內心和諧，還是社會組織和諧，皆建立於宇宙宏大和諧基礎之上。蒲柏與孔子視中庸為理想生活之道德標準。然而，與儒家中庸相比，蒲柏式中庸顯得孤立而機械，因為詩人沒有看到內部和諧與宇宙和諧間可能的相互作用。蒲柏與儒家對於中庸的近似理解可追溯到萊布尼茲與博林布魯克(Bolingbroke)的影響。二人皆以極大熱情，深研儒家。從大背景看，蒲柏中庸觀之形成，深植於十七、十八世紀歐洲漢學。

**關鍵詞：**亞歷山大·蒲柏、儒家、和諧、中庸

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