

# **Autobiography of Existence: On Suffering and the Emergence of Moral Agency**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an autobiographical and reflective account of suffering. The goal of this study is to reflect on the aspects that enable a person to find meaning and moral agency under adversity, and to further consider the implications of the role of education as an important mode of recovering and empowering such human agentic capacity so people can become ethically capable and responsible individuals and citizens. This work, historical and phenomenological in nature, offers an approach to thinking about what it means to be human, and it is an approach that illuminates appropriate ways of getting at how we understand ourselves. Such is the insight I am gathering from the philosophies and scholarship from East and West, both classical and modern. I point to, as examples of illuminating the nature of adversity and the meaning of being in the face of oppression, hardship, and tribulation, the ways of participation and becoming that many of us undertook during the Chinese Cultural Revolution as well as during the current time of natural catastrophes.

In this study, I thus advance two positions. First, moral agency can be empowered in adversity and experiences of suffering may be seen as a necessary condition for such empowerment and development of human subjectivity, and hence, for humanity. Second, great trial and hardship must be considered as specific educational situations of educating for wisdom and ethical being. I hope to argue that the experience of suffering itself offers life's most substantive and substantial teaching; I ponder these questions as potential topics for further study: How can our contemporary education embrace suffering and pain of human experience? How should we orient our education toward this kind of teaching?"

Thus, with this thesis I hope to offer new ways of thinking about hardship, adversity and suffering and to call for efforts to educate for robust agentic capacity, hence envisioning educating young people from the potential to the actual, from the implicit to the explicit, from being to becoming. This work is thus intended to further conversations within philosophy of education and moral education.

**Keywords:** suffering; moral agency; autobiography; philosophy of education; moral education

## Dedication

*He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

(“Maxim and Arrows,” *Twilight of the Idols*, 1988/2004)

故天将降大任于斯人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，空乏其身，行拂乱其所为，所以动心忍性，曾益其所不能。

《生于忧患，死于安乐》选自《孟子》（战国）

*To bestow a great task on a person,  
Heaven must first let her suffer in heart and mind, spirit and will.  
Then Heaven toils her muscles and bones, starves her body,  
And deprive her of resources, subject her to troubles and setbacks  
That way to stimulate her in heart, strengthen her in character, harden her will,  
And to enhance her capacities.*

—Mengzi

(“To Be Through Sorrows and Misfortunes; Not To Be Through Indulging in Ease and Leisure” in The Book of Teaching Children, II, *Mengzi*—My translation)

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## Preface

As encouraged by the endorsement of the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council (03/18/2010) of UBC that a new single structure and format to be followed for theses and dissertations to provide additional flexibility, I incorporate four manuscript-based chapters into this dissertation. Each chapter is a standalone essay incorporating narrative, which therefore serves to support the autobiographical, phenomenological, and hermeneutical nature of the thesis. The first chapter is a traditional literature review chapter (together with the prologue of the thesis), outlining the theme, argument/questions and goals of the dissertation. The second chapter is a discussion of the key concepts and primary themes underpinning the thesis. The manuscript-based chapters 3 through 6 (two are published, respectively, in *Philosophy of Education*, 2011 and *Journal of Moral Education*, 2011) are integrated into the flow of the thesis to produce a unified and appropriately-sequenced argument. They are presented, in both form and content, as a unified whole. The formatting is consistent throughout the thesis (with a single bibliography instead of one per chapter).

## **Prologue: Our Sweet Agony**

Our own hearts let us wear more pity; let  
Us live to our sad selves, hereafter generous,  
Dutiful; not live this suffered mind  
With this suffered morale suffering yet.  
Our sweet agony meant to be human and mortal.

—by the author (2010)

## **A Weighty Existence**

Whilst death may be a weight to us all,  
Life to carry along may even be so much more;  
A peck of force—between life and death,  
Lifts up our blood first, and—  
Lets it down, after all.  
They say it's the force of gravity—  
An irresistible weight yet to anchor prosperity,

But rather we look forward  
To what we've struggled to bear,  
Yet, I grieve to say,  
Even in the darkness, we elect to stay,  
To linger and to play;  
That way, life —if we would bear—  
Is our inviolable pilgrimage,  
With kernels and ears life is aweigh.

—by the author (2009)

It transpired many years ago, after my father had struggled through countless long and dark winters for a true and honourable living, that death, after all, took his life. But a gaze of yearning for life in his eyes at the very moment pierced my heart—very deeply, so deeply that it has continued to hold me until today. To me, that gaze was never closed. All these years, I couldn't forget that penetrating gaze as much as I couldn't forget the words he uttered five days before his heart finally ceased to beat.

I stood in front of the bed. Hardly could I recognize my father, nor could I accept the striking contrast between him then and my former dashing and “unconquerable” father I had known and loved while growing up. He was still quite alert, but when he glanced at me his eyes evaded mine. Yet his voice came out so firmly that I could hardly dare to match such a sound with the thin body lying beneath the white cover. “Sanmei (my nickname), I will fight with it! I will live!” he said to me, in a low yet inviolable voice. But death was stronger than dauntless courage, stronger than indomitable spirit, certainly stronger than integrity.

“Professor Huang was well-known for his rigorous scientific approach in general and his outstanding accomplishments in applied statistics in particular,” expressed one of his graduate students in his eulogy. “He had devoted all he had—and still longed for what he had left—to teaching us and giving and caring for us all!” My grief, somehow, was far beyond my ability to express and, even more strangely, beyond my emotions. It was not just about the loss of one's dearest father; loving husband, once an honoured teacher of excellence, or a “genius” (praised by his colleagues and denounced by his persecutors). It was as if a pure life of energy had been squandered. Father was only sixty-four, too young for someone who had just won himself a right to live, as a human being, after

years and years of demeaned and fettered life in the unprecedented Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China.

Having heard about his death, over twenty students my father had taught thirty years before in a college gathered from all over China to come to see my mother. They told us many things about my father: his enthusiasm, personality, dedication, precision, and his humour and artistic talents, and how their lives were influenced by their beloved teacher. Among them, many became professors of mathematics like my father. “His passion for teaching as well as for life had unmatched influence on me and I passed it on to my own children,” one student said, with deep gratitude. “Teacher Huang was amazing,” another recalled, relaxed and joyful. “He walked into our classroom with only a small piece of paper and a couple of pieces of chalk in his hand.” She was then joined by others in unison of exuberance. “Teacher Huang didn’t need any teaching aids to draw a perfect circle or triangle!” “His blackboard calligraphy (handwriting) was extremely impressive and he always ended his blackboard writing exactly at the right bottom of the blackboard with a period.” One woman accounted a little instance, “Your father’s memory was exceptional! One day three years ago, I saw Teacher Huang walking in some distance in front of me, and I shouted out: ‘Teacher Huang!’ while wondering if he could still remember who I was. Your father turned back and his eyes quickly fell upon me in the crowd, and surprisingly, he said my name in two seconds: ‘Huang Yurong!’” She held my shoulders, almost shaking them, “Imagine after twenty seven years, and among all the students he taught, and all the sufferings he went through, he still remembered my name and recognized me even though I had grown into a woman!” Tears welled up in her eyes.

Father was affectionate and sensitive. He took the greatest possible care of his family, especially my mother. Mother was a gynaecologist and obstetrician, working in a local hospital. And whenever mother had night shifts, father always walked to the hospital to accompany her home, no matter if it was two or three o'clock in the morning, although we lived on the hospital residence compound within 5 minutes' walk. Not once did he ever miss his wee hours' duty, as long as he was at home, between his frequent lock-ups in the cowshed or imprisonments. It was hard to believe that he never dined out alone without his family after he married my mother and had a family, even a lunch or a snack. He always brought food home and ate together with mother, Shudu, Ming (my two elder brothers) and me. When we were young, we knew that we should always wait for my mother to come to the table before we started our meals.

I remember almost every time when mother came home from work, father always walked over and gave her a cleaned apple, or a peeled orange, or any fruit available in the house since mother had been diagnosed as having hypertension at the age of thirty-five. Because of this, as I recall, father read through many medical books and let us know that beside other things mother needed vitamins more than anyone else in the house. In those years in China, we lived on meagre necessities; food and groceries were allocated to each person, by month or year (we used coupons to buy rice, meat, cooking oil, and even salt, soap, and toothpaste—almost everything!), not to mention “luxurious” provisions, such as fruits and green vegetables. I grew up learning to save for mother fruits and vegetables that contain rich vitamins. Even when I later was away from home in school, I saved oranges I bought with rice coupons in the “fruit-city” where I went university. Because the weather was humid and hot in summer, and I saved them for almost two months, one

third of the sweet oranges were rotten when I finally brought them home to mother on my summer vacation. I didn't even eat one, because those were for my mother!

My father was the oldest grandson, and only direct heir of “黄家”<sup>1</sup> (the Huang Family) in his generation, after my little aunt Huang Yongan died at age of twenty and younger uncle Huang Yongkang in the Yunnan (Kunmin) earthquake in 1975 (both of whom I had not had chance to meet). Later we learnt from literary works of Chinese history and arts,<sup>2</sup> the “Huang Family” was one of the prominent families in late Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty, the last empire of China. Father's great-grandfather Huang Shiling (黄士陵), styled *Mufu* (牧甫), attended *Guozijian*, the Imperial College and the highest educational administration in feudal China.<sup>3</sup> Huang Shiling was said to serve as imperial tutor at the Qing Imperial Palace. He was considered one of the greatest four artists in the late Qing and was accomplished in calligraphy, painting and, in particular, carving, and particularly eminent for his artistry of Chinese *Yinzhang*, the “seal cutting.” My father's grandfather, Huang Shaomu, the eldest son of Huang Shiling, the direct and sole heir of Huang Shiling's first wife, was also an artist, painter, calligrapher, seal graver and an important Qing high-rank official. “The father and son of the Huang family,” to whom people often referred, marked a stage in the history of Chinese art of seal cutting.<sup>4</sup> And

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<sup>1</sup> “黄家” (the Huang Family): referred to the large Huang lineage, mainly from Huang Shiling, Huang Shaomu, Huang Liancheng, Huang Yongfeng to the 5<sup>th</sup> heir Huang Ming (my brother) and now Huang Bo (my nephew).

<sup>2</sup> See Shanghai Museum's *Seal Cutting Selections of the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, 1984, T. H. Han's *China Sigillography Chronological Table*, 1993, and P. Li's *The Seal Cutting in the Ming Dynasty, and the Republic of China, Huang Shiling*, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See Z. N. Xia and Phraseology Compilation Committee edited *Chinese Phraseology* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), 1980/2000.

<sup>4</sup> See C. Xin's *On Huang Shiling (II)* in *China Seal Cutting*, Vol 9, Issue 3/4, pp. 2-11 (1994) and *On Huang Shiling (II)* *China Seal Cutting*, Vol 12, Issue 4/5, pp. 2-8 (1995).



both were acclaimed for their simplicity, authenticity, resoluteness, and steadfastness in character and style of artistry.

As a young man father was determined to break off relations with his Qing kinsmen. He left home at a young age and pawned a valuable Qing jade hairpin to attend Zhejiang University, studying mathematics. Upon graduation, he joined Mao Zedong's army, as a young intellectual recruited in The No. 2 University of Military Politics, wishing to be part of the Anti-Japanese War and liberation to New China. Inherited from his ancestors, his morale, seeking-no-fame-or-wealth-but-truth, became fatal for his subsequent life journey as an intellectual and scholar. Later on father often ironically remarked: "I fought for the Chinese Communist Party, and now I'm in her prison!" The reason was unknown, whether it was for his Manchu (Qing) blood-related family or his intellectual and academic achievements, or his "unworldly" worldview and unsophisticated way of interacting with political movements. At the point of break-off between Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party and Jiang Jieshi's Guomindang, father was an active university student and substitute teacher, gathering the folks to oppose the Japanese invasion in his hometown, Wannan, Anhui Province. In 1966 the unprecedented "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China" broke out and father was denounced as a "secret agent and traitor."

### **A Renunciation of Existence**

Tuojiang River,  
A bosom of life  
Sweeps in a thin veil of water,  
Irrigating a stretch of land.

Neijiang, a city of sugarcane  
Imbibed in Tuojiang water,  
Absorbs its taste of sweetness.  
The flowing of the water  
Mirrors a myriad of my dreams.  
The water I drank endeared us all.

Until one day, Tuojiang turned into  
A bed of death roaring ghastly waves,  
Beneath the sable-enveloped sky.  
The lethal current of Tuojiang water,  
Engulfed my brother Shudu.  
The bitter water of Tuojiang  
Denounced its sweet caresses,  
Like a mirror;  
Multiplied the images of my sorrows,  
Broken asunder my hopes, my fears.  
(from *Tuojiang River, My Native Heath!*<sup>5</sup>—by the author, 2005)

Tuojiang River, though constantly shadowed by an endless cloak of clouds (so I seem to remember), raised generation after generation. Three of us siblings were born in a hospital 500 meters away from Tuojiang, and attended the same elementary school by the River.

But on one summer day my father and mother were called upon and notified that someone who looked like my eldest brother Huang Shudu was missing while swimming

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<sup>5</sup> The poem was excerpted from “Tuojiang River, My Native Heath!” (沱江河, 我的故乡!) in my MA thesis, entitled “An Echo of Silence Through the Vale of Oppression: Name, literacy and memory.”

in the river. Still in high hopes that it wouldn't be Shudu—Shudu had been swimming in that river since a baby (!)—father and mother rushed to the riverbank. By then the water was calm with silent ripples. Some people (not many) were standing there, sluggishly under the blazing sun, around three young bodies lying on the riverbank. They were Shudu's classmates. It was still school time, but why were these 6 graders not at school? Later on we knew that their teacher didn't show up in class,<sup>6</sup> and the boys had gone swimming. Just to their consolation and hope, father and mother didn't see any sign of brother Shudu, but they caught a glimpse of Shudu's clothes.... Mother begged people to help in search of Shudu.

Half an hour later, my 13 year-old-brother, Shudu, was pulled out of the river. He appeared to be alive, no signs of drowning. (My parents didn't give up and tried, for the rest of the day, every means to bring brother Shudu back, but Shudu's eyes remained closed and his pulse never resumed. To everyone's astonishment, these four young good swimmers died at one and the same time! What had happened to them?! Stunningly terrified, we were told that the river was electrified!! My brother Shudu was killed in the electrified water of Tuojiang River—the Mother River of our hometown! A last image as such engraved in my mind at age seven. But there was no charge for the crime. The solatium for each life was five hundred Chinese Yuan. That was the end of the “killing” as well as the end of the four young lives! And, the end of the eldest grandson of the Huang Family!

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<sup>6</sup> Elementary and secondary schooling was irregular, often suspended during the 10-year's Chinese Cultural Revolution while post-secondary education was completely suspended.

## **Tormented Despair and Tormented Hope**

Throughout the eleven years of the Cultural Revolution, my father underwent all kinds of public humiliations—mental and physical—interspersed with lockups and segregation, and often he came home beaten and bruised. But he never yielded to the allegations that he was a traitor, or Kuomintang special agent. From the start of the Cultural Revolution until its end and continuing for a few more years, fourteen, he was expelled from “教师队伍” (the teachers’ ranks). If he was not taken away into isolation or imprisonment, he was the janitor of the school. Even so, accidents often took place. One day close to the end of the Cultural Revolution, he came home, hurt and disappointed, with a bump on his right forehead in the size of a ping-pong ball, his clothes torn. I was about to step out to fetch lunch in the hospital dining hall when I saw my father walk in. (Our family lived in the hospital residence compound where we could fetch three meals in the staff dining hall). This time he was very hurt—so hurt that his eyes filled with tears.

A young and strong PE teacher hit him. “He picked me up by the collar like a little chicken in front of the students,” described my father. The humiliation was far beyond his strong dignity to bear. Since I was a little older then, in junior middle school, I came to understand him more: he could bear any physical torture and torment, but the constant inhumane humiliation was eating him up.

Father then realised that life could be so “brittle.” After Shudu’s death, a few years later, brother Ming was sent to the countryside to farm the fields as a re-educated youth, and father and mother decided to send me away to “hide” at my grandparents’ place in Kunming, Yunnan Province. I was “secretly” transferred to Kunming No. 13 Middle School. Months later I missed father, mother and brother Ming, and mostly, I was

worried about them, thinking that together with them I could somehow be of some help. My tears and volition melted brother Ming's heart, and he wrote to me: "Wait for me, Meimei (younger sister). I will come and bring you home. We'll just be together no matter what happens!" Six months later, 17-year-old brother Ming used his whole year's "income" (earned through his first year's farming as a re-educated youth), 75 Yuan Renmingbi to buy train fare for both of us (he gave the remainder to Grandfather). He traveled for two days and two nights to Kunming to bring me home. But, as usual and always without father, our "home" was as empty and "cold." He was once again taken away...

Persecution continued and the situation worsened. The local authority sent my father away under segregation, froze his bank account, cut off his income. As father was unable to send support payment to my grandparents, the persecutors went to Kunming and "talked" to my grandfather. As a result, we knew that my grandfather received monthly compensation from the government. In return, one more indictment added to father's earlier crimes was that his own elderly father accused him in the charge. After that, father and grandfather never spoke to each other again. When father died, grandfather was pounding his heart, crying: "I threw stones on him when he had fallen into the well."<sup>7</sup> It was me who doomed him to death! It was me...."

When the Cultural Revolution finally ended in 1976, after the disastrous purge of the intellectuals in China, father hoped to embrace the new life. He was dying to return

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<sup>7</sup> It was a Chinese proverb: "落井下石," meaning figuratively, to strike the man when he is down; to take advantage of someone's difficulties to persecute him. It is from a Literary Allusion, [唐] 韩愈【柳子厚墓志铭】"Biographical Sketch Engraved on Liu Zihou's Memorial Tablet" by Han Yu in the Tang Dynasty: "...When seeing a man falling into a trap, instead of extending a hand to save the man, he pushed the man into the trap and threw a stone into it. Such men could be seen everywhere."

to school to teach. He seemed to forget the pain which was still acute, the wound still unscarred, and his debased integrity still fresh, but with a strong longing for life, an instinct of survival in searching for the meaning of life, he forgave all those who had tortured his body, soiled his dignity, threatened his moral integrity, killed his eldest son.... One day in 1977, he was so excited, happy and high-spirited. We were happy for him although we could not predict the future, after being in darkness and despair for eleven years. This, however, promised hope. I saw him carefully wrapping a stack of paper. It was a manuscript, a textbook that he compiled during his various segregations and imprisonments! He said he would go to submit this manuscript to the authorities of Neijiang District Municipal Education Bureau. He left, dressed in his favourite *Zhongshanzhuang*.<sup>8</sup> We were waiting at home, for his happy return.

A few long hours later, he came home, pale and drawn, as if half of his life had been taken away. My heart dropped instantly. Mother approached him, and Ming helped him sit down on his old rattan armchair. All of a sudden, a stifling tension encompassed the room. We knew this was bad, bad enough to suffocate us as the only ray of hope and the slight chance for the whole family dimmed. Eleven years, long and harsh, still saw the most tantalizing hope dangling in the air. We knew he had been waiting for this day, the day he could be accepted and treated as a person, a teacher—one who wished to, if he could, do for what and whom he loved—his family, students, teaching.... During all those years, we wished, prayed, dreamed. Father held everything to heart and will merely for this day!

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<sup>8</sup> *Zhongshanzhuang*, “中山装,” a sort of grey Chinese uniform jacket is men’s traditional formal outfit.

Trained and practiced well enough, we sensed the dreadful forecast, but father, however, was more hurt than in despair. “Cao Yankang screamed at me,” father murmured. “‘Get out! Get out!’ in front of everyone.” Cao was the Chief Secretary of the District Health and Education Bureau (Cao was the very local authority to decide the fate of father and mother in the system of education and health care). “He said that twice! I’m only asking to hand in my new manuscript!” Father continued, extremely emotional. Obviously, the humiliation was still the hardest thing for a man of pride and integrity to accept after all these unbearable years.

What was the worst, our hopes were completely shattered when father was taken away later to three more years’ imprisonment without any new allegations! We were then thrown into complete darkness with the slightest spark of hope stifled, because the Cultural Revolution had been brought to an end. Many years later, at my wedding, brother Ming burst into a wail, recalling one of his tormented despairs: “One day I got some detonator! I just wanted to explode Cai Yankang with me! But I thought of my little sister.... What would happen to her afterwards...?” Ming had struggled with a profound sense of responsibility of a 17-year-old man in the desperate abyss of his life!

One day, father was sent home for medical treatment after two years and nine months in prison. Mother, as always, prepared his favourite dishes, and a small cup of Chinese liquor and deep-fried peanuts, a combination of dishes that had become family customs for this kind of moment. It was the best time for our family to be together, enjoying the meagre domestic happiness. It was because of this, I always believed, that my father survived the inhumane living of those long fourteen years. As always, father was positive and hopeful in his deteriorating health: helping Ming and me with preparing

our university admission examinations,<sup>9</sup> telling us jokingly about the doggerel he wrote during his prison time, one of which was called “Professor and Ducks.” The verse was about a starving Professor who stole the raw sweet potatoes from the Ducks’ bowl, and afraid of being caught by the Ducks; the Professor hastened to bite off the hard chunks of raw sweet potatoes and made his front teeth crooked. He then showed us his ragged front teeth. For three years we hadn’t seen him, except mother was eventually allowed to visit him only one time during his two-year-and-nine-month imprisonment. He had changed a great deal, the sunken eyes, the crooked teeth, and his face thin and pale. But his glaring eyes were as thrusting, firm and eager as before.

“Accomplished” as he felt in prison, he was more hopeful and promising than ever: “In prison, I was teaching the children of the jail guards and, the son of the warden was admitted to university!” He felt useful, accepted, and respected. There was a little bitter smile on his face; I knew it was the hardest part of his shattered pride. The endless unbearable humiliation and violation had been engulfing his health. Yet, his faith was still firm, as I recall Nietzsche, “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how” (Nietzsche, in “Maxim and Arrows,” *Twilight of the Idols*, 1988/2004). My father had chosen his attitude in a given set of circumstances.

Fourteen years saw hundreds of appeal letters, constant separations and reunions, hopes and disappointments, poverty and deprivation, betrayal and death. In 1980, the head of the Southwest University of Finance and Economics (where father once taught

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<sup>9</sup> In 1977 China finally restored its higher education after a 10-year’s university suspension during the Cultural Revolution. Both Ming and I were preparing ourselves for the entrance examination.



for many years) made a special trip to *Leshan Jail* where my father was last imprisoned. He visited my father and brought him back to the university. Father devoted his days and nights to work, teaching and compiling, as if he had never lived before. Four years later, in 1984, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and hospitalized. When the doctor asked him to have an immediate operation, my father almost begged him: “Please just give me three more months. I want to finish this book.” At that very moment, my heart felt as if a cold blade was stabbing it.... I had never experienced such helpless agony and regret in my life! My father did finish his last book *The Mathematical Statistics*—which was published two years after his death.

### **Philosophical and Educational Quest**

Recalling and writing about my father is difficult. It is difficult because it has forced me to face again the harsh reality of our living. Whilst I am turning to this part of human existence, I am stripping my memory of this particular suffering and reflecting on a general trying situation that may afflict any individuals in the increasingly challenging socio-economic and political conditions that exist in countless locations across the world today. Whilst I am recalling the pain my father suffered, I perceive meaning in that suffering—a sort of meaning that only arises from the weighty darkness of our vicissitudes and their implications. I came to understand that suffering is an inescapable part of life, just like death. Without death, by which suffering may be part of its anticipation, human life is not complete. Nevertheless, I do not mourn. I do not pity. I, somehow, envy my father because his willingness, his intentions, his thoughts and his actions were a superior kind and his generosity and responsibility for life and endurance

throughout suffering and death won him his purposeful life and meaningful existence. I am reminded of Dostoevsky's words, "There is one thing I dread: not be worthy of my sufferings" (as cited in Frankl's *Man's Search for Life*, 1946/1984, p. 87). My father bore his sufferings in a genuine inner achievement of free spirit. It is this spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

Thus suffering as part of life becomes the point of departure for my philosophical and educational inquiry. Our own suffering stories, lived and harboured, are invariably welling up in emotions and sensations, in words and motions, in questions and queries, pointing toward an ontological and epistemological quest for a flourishing human existence, on the one hand, and for human potential of philosophizing how to suffer and how to die, on the other. Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder (in *Metaphysics*)—wonder at the fact that things are how they are. Hegel told us that philosophy starts with experience (in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*). And for Nietzsche, in contrast to Aristotle, philosophy begins in terror—terror of existence (in *The Birth of Tragedy*). All this tells me that we begin with our feelings, perceptions, imaginations, impressions, aims, and duties, all of which interact with both the inner and outer worlds.

We begin with whatever we find awareness in ourselves, in others, and in the natural and social world. We then aim to interpret and justify the significance and implication of our living and lived experiences. Such perennial questions oblige me to ask first as: In what way can meaning be taken out of situations of helplessness? How can anyone recognize there is meaning when there is an encompassing sense of darkness? To what extent can people choose among the things that befall them? And what kind of people can and cannot survive their despair and death? In reading Viktor Frankl's book

*Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1984), I encountered the central theme of existentialism: to live is to suffer, or to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering, tragedy, and death.

Thus, a strong motive, germinated from experiencing the particular tragedies and sufferings, in person or vicariously, compels me to inquire into the significant meaning of human afflictions— any forms of the kind—that may allow people to generate meaning of life, and hence, to search for ways that enable them to arise from the things that befall them by empowering and actualizing their potentiality. It is the connection between suffering and the possibility of empowerment of our human agency that I wish to investigate in what follows.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

We value our pain and suffering. Each life owes and is owed so much suffering. Each class or station of life has its own pain and suffering. In one of their many forms, ...[tragedy, pain and suffering] define our consciousness, pervade our memories, incite our conscience, and are the substance of our best stories. They are at the core of our moral lives.

—Joseph Amato (1990, p. 1)

This dissertation is an autobiographical account of suffering. The goal of this study is to reflect on the aspects that enable a person to find meaning and moral agency under adversity, and to further consider the profound implications of the role of education as an important mode of recovering and empowering such human agentic capacity so people can become ethically capable and responsible individuals and citizens. This work, historical and

phenomenological in nature, offers an approach to thinking about what it means to be human, and it is an approach that illuminates appropriate ways of getting at how we understand ourselves. This hermeneutical, phenomenological study reveals that the connection of suffering to one's reflection on it is deeply concerned with knowledge of mortality and willingness to survive abject conditions vis-à-vis self-discipline and self-overcoming. I point to, as examples of illuminating the nature of adversity and the meaning of being (or truth) in the face of oppression, hardship, and tribulation, the ways of participation and becoming that many of us undertook during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. My own survival, as a child survivor of the oppressive regime that ruled China during the Cultural Revolution, depended upon engaging the conditions of oppression with my creativity in art-making.

While I am not glorifying or valorizing suffering for its own sake, I am suggesting that, because suffering is such a pervasive and enduring fact of humanity's existence, we need to engage with it in a manner that we go through, and, eventually out of suffering. Such is the insight I am gathering from the philosophies and scholarship from East and West, both classical and modern. In this study, I thus advance two positions. First, moral agency can be empowered in adversity and experiences of suffering may be seen as a necessary condition for such empowerment and development of human subjectivity, and hence, for humanity. Second, great trial and hardship must be considered as specific educational situations of educating for individuals' wisdom and ethical being. Being reflective and interpretive in approach, this study offers no claims about establishing specific curricular programs of suffering in schools, nor does it provide concrete pedagogical practices of suffering in classroom and others that might be expected to follow from them. As I hope to argue that the experience of suffering itself offers life's

most substantive and substantial teaching, I do ponder these questions as potential topics for further study: How can our contemporary education embrace suffering and pain of human experience? How should we orient our education toward this kind of teaching?

A more detailed summary of the chapters is as follows. In Chapter 1, I give an overview of the literature on suffering and moral education. Chapter 2, I unpack key concepts (e.g., suffering, human felicity, duty, human agency and virtue) and delineate primary themes (e.g., humanism, ethical paradox and/or potentially fruitful coexistence of happiness and pain in the moral life) that are underpinning the thesis. Chapters 3 through 6 will be four standalone essays of narrative (some being considered for publication or already published) in academic journals. Chapter 3 takes its retrospective lead from the oppressive schooling years during the Chinese Cultural Revolution to reflect on the educational significance of artistic activities through considering aesthetic virtues and moral agency cultivated in these activities. Describing an unconventional educational milieu where schooling was deliberately “dismantled,” I emphasize the important role artistic endeavours can play in building a person’s aesthetic strength and moral power to overcome the adversity of life. This chapter will stress the less articulated educational discourse that makes dance relevant to the educational formation of epistemic virtues and moral sensibilities.

In Chapter 4 I draw on Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a rich site for conceptualizing moral agency by exploring how individuals, in their willingness to accept the tragic and suffering, reach the state of discovery. Focusing on both the tragic and cathartic experience, I explore how the process of transformation takes place and how the tragic or experiencing pain has impact on this transformation. Thus this chapter is intended to

draw our attention to the educational relevance that bears on the tragic and cathartic moments individuals are experiencing. Chapter 5 (a published article in *Philosophy of Education*, 2011) is an examination of moral agency as a mean in education. Drawing on Aristotle's concept of the "Golden Mean" and Confucius' "Doctrine of the Mean," I discuss the idea of moral agency as an object of ethics and moral education with a focus on a mean state between suffering experiences and choices, between the agentic moral state and educational efforts. In this chapter I further consider qualities such as self-discipline, self-reflection, and courage as agency to ensure moral choices approaching the mean state, and suggest that these qualities can be cultivated through education.

Chapter 6 (published in the *Journal of Moral Education*, 2011), serves as a conclusion to the thesis, and is a narrative essay of human suffering in natural calamities. Grounded in Eastern and Western metaphysics and ethics, I assess the human condition brought about by the 2008 earthquake disaster in China. While raising questions about how human beings are intrinsically interrelated to Nature and the world, I propose that bearing and transcending suffering—part of the human narrative—helps human beings to realise their ethical potential. This account is linked by a thread of humanism encompassing three important values (caring, responsibility and free spirit). I conclude by suggesting that educating young people for the wisdom of suffering is to cultivate a humanistic morality and that to conceptualise moral education as "living and learning to bear suffering" offers a humanistic vision for choices people make in the face of drastic threats to their existence.

This autobiographical and reflective work, presenting a historically sociopolitical experience of suffering in light of an education in cultivating a human agency, concerns

the legitimate aspiration and challenge of searching for the meaning of life in general and commitment of moral education in particular for educating responsible individuals and citizens. Thus, with this dissertation I hope to offer new ways of thinking about hardship, adversity and suffering and to call for the efforts to educate for moral individuals with robust agentic capacity, hence envisioning educating young people from the potential to the actual, from the implicit to the explicit, from being to becoming. This work is thus intended to further conversations within philosophy of education and moral education.

## Chapter 1. Philosophy of Suffering and Moral Education: A Brief Overview

There are moods in which we court suffering in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth.

—Ralph Walden Emerson (1803-82)<sup>10</sup>

### Introduction

Philosophical reflection on suffering and ethical matters is as old as human consciousness itself. Where there is a respect for life and reality, there exist concerns over human affliction and injustice, whether natural or sociopolitical, individual or collective, which ultimately prompts a search for happiness, equality and freedom. Both Western and Eastern wisdom and education, alongside modern medicine, technology, communications and expertise, constitute people's potential for historical progress. Nonetheless, "the rising rivers of suffering that come from every quarter" (Amato, 1990, p. 184) may afflict human beings at all times. These are depicted in literary works and experienced in real life as sociopolitical (the Holocaust, the Chinese Cultural Revolution) and economic (the world economic depression and crises before and today), or natural calamities (earthquakes, tsunamis). At the time of writing this introduction the aftermath of China's Yunnan earthquake has occurred alongside a combined earthquake, tsunami

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<sup>10</sup> American Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) wrote important *Essays: First (1941) and Second (1944) Series*, a collection of his lectures. This epigraph is from *Essays: Second Series*, "II, Experience" (Lines 19-22), which is also cited in the January issue of Harper's magazine, "Between Insanity and Fat Dullness" by Phillip Lopate, reviewing Emerson's journals.



and nuclear disaster in Japan. Suffering, always a part of the human condition (Pickering & Rosati, 2008), has been captured in Nietzsche's (1872/1993) terror of existence,<sup>11</sup> and Noel Carroll's (1990) *The Philosophy of Horror* (a perplexing concept announced in the title of the book), where horrors and destruction of human existence were at the core of existentialism particularly in the decades following the Second World War.

In his metaphorical expression, Ralph Waldo Emerson inquires into a deep understanding of suffering by offering a view which explores the intrinsic nature of the human condition. This humanist view can be traced as far back as to Confucius from ancient China and Socrates from ancient Greece, in addition to the book of Job in Judeo-Christian thought. When the two great classic thinkers (Confucius and Socrates) had philosophized on life and people (putting philosophy down to ordinary people from "Heaven" or "God"—a concept in both the Chinese and Western traditions), they emphasized reason and the virtue of humanity. As Emerson (1944) asserts, we "court suffering," because we hope we shall at least "find reality" (II, Lines 20-21). Thus, ordinary people need to come down from above and land on the hard ground with "sharp angular peaks and edges of truth" (II, Line 21). We are then reminded of the philosophy of suffering and death from classical antiquity to modern ideology, from the Eastern wisdom of suffering (in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism) to Western views of tragedy (in Aristotle, Greco-Roman Stoicism, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche). To them I shall return in the sections to follow.

Until our own times, and surely proceeding into the future, the philosophy of suffering, I would suggest, is an ethic of existence, wisdom of life, or *Dao* of Man. It exists

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<sup>11</sup> See Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, Section 17, published in 1872. The *Birth of Tragedy* (with the case of Wagner) was translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1966.

because human beings are not only mortal and sentient, but also rational and purposeful beings, who have an ultimate goal for reaching the state of *eudaimonia* (the Greek word for happiness), defined as the expression of human excellence or virtue in action (see Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics*, NE, trans. 1980/1998). Philosophy, in a great sense, is viewed as a means of dealing with death, suffering and tragedy. The Roman Stoic philosopher, Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), pronounced that “to study philosophy is nothing but to prepare one’s self to die” (Tusc., i. 31.). Classical scholar Pierre Hadot (1995/2007) has noted in his influential book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*,

Leaving aside all of the rich Western literary tradition, so well illustrated by Montaigne’s chapter “That to philosophize is to learn to die,” we can go straight to Heidegger in order to rediscover this fundamental philosophical exercise in his definition of the authenticity of existence as a lucid anticipation of death. (pp. 68-69)

According to Hadot, in ancient Greece, Plato had defined philosophy as an exercise for death, understood as the separation of the soul from the body (Ibid.). Philosophers have long been taking the lead in formulating this particular kind of attitude towards death; the ancient question of the examined life (by Socrates in Plato’s *Dialogues*), amid constant introspection of our relational selves with others, and by extension, with fate or death, as described in Confucian and Daoist teachings (e.g., *Analects*, *Mengzi*, *Dao De Jing*). There is a link between the examined life and introspective self as “those who rightly philosophize are practicing to die” (see Plato’s

*Phaedo*). The philosophy of suffering is thus deeply embedded in Western philosophies and Eastern traditions, in the everyday dealing with human suffering and reflection on people's morality and ethical resources in recognition of what reality is, what we value, and how we live our lives. The cultivation of such human resources, I suggest, can be seen as the "wisdom of tragedy" in Nietzsche (trans., 1993/2003) or the "tragic wisdom" of Gabriel Marcel (1973/1985). Both philosophical and educational questions arise as one begins to ponder the nature of death and suffering, in relation to its way of life in addition to the individuals who live that life. Broadly, these questions rest on two areas: the first is metaphysical, addressing questions such as: What is human suffering? What transpires when tragedy and suffering befall humankind? What are we? What resources does one have to deal with suffering? The second is the quest for what moral education can do in forming the ethics of life by way of suffering. Together, such questions provoke an understanding of suffering and our making of ethical choices. It is thus not surprising to see the extent to which contemporary scholarship concerns the subject of suffering and its philosophical and educational relevance to a person's social and moral development. Studies on suffering and the sufferer are undertaken under different conditions and with different modes of reasoning.<sup>12</sup>

In this review chapter, I consider two main areas—the philosophy and education of suffering with regard to the questions: How might suffering affect human beings and

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<sup>12</sup> Within philosophy and education relevant texts include Amato, 1990; Arcilla, 1992; Burbules, 1990; Carr, 2007a, 2007b; Carroll, 1990; Jonas, 2010; Mayerfeld, 1999; Mintz, 2008a, 2008b 2011; Mouly, 1982; Stillwaggon, 2010 and Todd, 2001, 2002, 2004. Within psychology and psychotherapy, Black, 2006; Bourdieu, 1993; Frankl, 1959 and Miller, 2004. Within sociology and anthropology, Kaufman, 2000; McNay, 2008; Pickering & Rosati, 2008 and Wilkinson, 2001, 2005. And within health care, Cassell, 1991; Carnevale, 2009; Fredriksson, & Eriksson, 2001; Johnston & Scholler-Jquish, 2007 and Younger, 1995.

our views of suffering? And how should one educate people to be wise in surviving such a pervasive and enduring fact of the human condition? I begin with a discussion of the philosophy of suffering, not as a doctrine or a system of thought, but as an ethic of life, a way of being. On the one hand, ethical views advocate ways of living in confronting existential conditions, in particular, those which are bound to respond and to make ethical decisions. Thus, I review the Stoics and ancient Chinese wisdom as examples of how ancient philosophy can offer meaning to people's lives and their ethical aspirations and educational commitment even in our present day. To this end, I locate similar concerns in the writings of existentialism. On the other hand, making ethical choices, as a way of being, by way of human afflictions, is related to one's ethical responsibility and moral agency. (I shall delineate these concepts in Chapter 2.) These are questions concerning ethical matters of suffering and education, because the chief end and role of education, as A. G. Grayling (2009) notes, is a response to, and I would add, a responsibility, for the conditions of our being and our thriving for life.

### **Suffering in the Ethic of Humanism**

The existentialists had one thing right. To live is to abide within the chilly coordinates of constant choice, choices about what to value, about how to live our lives, about ethics.

—Gordon Marino (In *Introduction to Ethics*, 2010)

Can we scorn pain, seeing that we find the mighty Hercules bear it so impatiently?

—Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations*, II. 22)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cicero's reference is to Hercules' call for the "gleaming thunderbolt" to release him from his final torments, as portrayed in the *Trachiniae* of Sophocles in Donald Philip Verene (1997, p. 1).

### ***In the Virtue of Fate, Emotion and Freedom***

**Greco-Roman Stoicism.** The philosophy of stoicism, founded in Greece around 300 B.C.E. by Zeno, is one of the classical ethical traditions and an important moral philosophy in the schools of antiquity. Although the uncertain and often unsettled nature of life in the Hellenic period gave rise to ethical doctrines, it is only after Aristotle's ethics that inner strength and security, which is *ataraxia* or peace of mind as the desired goal of life, was stressed. Grayling (2009) comments that Stoicism "formed the outlook of educated people for more than half a millennium before Christianity officially became the outlook of the Roman world" (p.181). The two greatest exponents of the late ethical outlook of Stoicism were Epictetus (55-135, C.E.), a freed slave, and Marcus Aurelius (121-180, C.E.), the ruler of Rome and Epictetus's distinguished student. *Discourses*<sup>14</sup> by Epictetus and *Meditations*<sup>15</sup> by Marcus Aurelius remain seminal works.

In his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946/2005), Bertrand Russell writes, "The main doctrines to which the school remained constant throughout are concerned with cosmic determinism and human freedom" (p. 242). In Stoicism, whatever transpires, which is determined not by chance but by natural laws, has transpired and will transpire

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<sup>14</sup> The *Discourses of Epictetus* are a series of extracts of the teachings of the Stoic. There were originally eight books, but only four now remain in their entirety, along with a few fragments of the others. Elizabeth Carter's translation was the first English version in 1758. See Percy Ewing Matheson's translation (1916); Sharon Lebell's new interpreted version, *The Art of Living: the Classical Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness* (1995); and Robert Dobbin's more recent translation (2008), *Discourses and Selected Writings*. See more on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourses\\_of\\_Epictetus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourses_of_Epictetus).

<sup>15</sup> *Meditations* were a collection of *hypomnemata* or personal notes, as a spiritual exercise. See Penguin Classics translation (2006) with notes by Martin Hammond and with introduction by Diskin Clay. Also see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (2007, p. 179). Hadot suggests that the better translation of the Greek title be *Exhortations to Himself*, first published in the West by the Zurich humanist Adreas Gesner, in 1558-9.

again, and as Russell affirms, “not once, but countless times” (p. 243). For Stoics, everything has a purpose connected with human beings, all decided by God, the soul of this universe and all connecting to fate, the divine providence or order of things. For Stoics, Russell notes, “All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature; the individual life is good when it is in harmony with Nature” (p. 243). For Epictetus (trans. 2008), “the divine nature and the nature of the good will correspond,” because the divine Nature is “mind,” “intelligence,” and “correct reason” (II.8.1-2). The Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius expressed a profound understanding that man is connected and governed by the laws, and that things depend not upon us, but upon our universal nature (*Meditations*, trans. 2006, 9.1, 9).

This Stoic doctrine of “indifference” is essential to Marcus Aurelius’s moral and practical philosophy. As examples of “indifference” Marcus (trans. 2006) gave death and life, fame and ignominy (2. 11[4], 9. 1[4], 10; 8.1). He said,

Those who wish to follow Nature and share her mind must themselves be indifferent to those pairs of opposites to which universal Nature is indifferent—she would not create these opposites if she were not indifferent either way. So anyone who is not himself indifferent to pain and pleasure, death and life, fame and obscurity—things universal Nature treats indifferently—is clearly committing a sin. (*Meditations*, 9. 1[4])

This echoes the Chinese view of Nature and people in Confucianism and Daoism (elaboration follows in the next subsection).

Some schools of thought believe that Stoicism adheres to a passive stance. Russell (1946/2005), however, posits that this “cheerless” determinist view is only one aspect of the Stoic doctrine. Stoics embrace an attitude that accepts whatever life gives as a “gift” that is something under one’s power. Epictetus believed that God could not give us everything, thus man does not have the capacity of being without hardships, or the capacity of not dying. God bestows a freedom, the freedom of mind to make meaning of things, to have judgment over things, to have judgment being resonant and in alignment with the order of things. That is, “it’s only appropriate that the gods have given us the best and most efficacious gift: the ability to make good use of impressions” (Epictetus, trans. 2008, I.1,7). The Stoic, connected with reason, mind and Nature in a cosmic meaning, believed that human minds possess power, and this power enables them to find strength and to alleviate endless suffering.

Stoicism originally emerged as a reaction against a belief that pleasure is always good and pain is always bad, a view held by Epicureanism, another philosophical branch of thought. Epicureans viewed happiness (equated with pleasure) as the sole good and suffering (as pain) as the sole evil (see Epicurus, trans. 1964). Epicureans and Stoics, in Hadot’s distinction, differed in their methods. For Epicureans, there is the need to “Persuade yourself that every new day that dawns will be your last one. And then you will receive each unhoped for hour with gratitude” (as cited in Hadot, 1995/2007, p. 68). In the perspective of Stoicism, the need to exercise for death, however, invites immediate transformation and makes inner freedom possible. They declare: “Let death be before your eyes each day and you will not have any base thoughts or excessive desires” (Ibid.). Following either the Stoic or Epicurean doctrine on human suffering and felicity, one

thing is not to be denied, that human beings can only live by whatever things transpire around us.

A core concept of Stoicism (as represented in Epictetus) is that people can avoid suffering if they distinguish what is in their power and what is not. What underlies this concept is the doctrine that one should cultivate an attitude of indifference (in the strict sense of this term) to what one cannot but act in the vicissitudes of life, and cultivate self-command in respect for all those things over which one has control—such as one’s fears and appetites, desires and hopes (Grayling, 2009, p.183). It is known that Stoics attempted to avoid emotions, in the belief that not only bad passions but all passions are to be condemned. For them, “every man has perfect freedom, provided he emancipates himself from mundane desires” (Russell, 1946/2005, p. 243). Marcus Aurelius developed the idea, “*indifferentia*” (see *Meditations*, 8. 24)—a way to free man’s passions for the material world. Even today we use the term “Stoic calm,” which refers to one who does not allow his or her feelings and desires to take command. The Stoic clearly places emphasis on self-control, in a way that detachment is required or demanded, where acceptance of one’s fate is identified by the objective use of reason.

Here we are mindful of Socrates as “the chief saint of the Stoics throughout their history” (Russell, 1946/2005, p. 242). As described in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates’s attitude at the time of his trial, his refusal to escape, his calmness in confronting death, and his contention that the perpetrator of injustice injures himself more than his victim, all fitted in perfectly with Stoic teaching. To some extent, the Stoic “indifference” was shared by pessimistic traditions such as Buddhists’ and philosophies such as Schopenhauer’s (1890/2006; 2004). Pessimists explain their attitude by positing that life



is never free from suffering. Buddhists, for whom “Life *is* suffering” (Mayerfeld, 1999, p. 158, emphasis in original), teach that suffering is caused by the frustration of desire, and consequently that the cure for suffering consists in the renunciation of desire. This view was echoed by Schopenhauer (trans. 1890/2006), who held that people endure suffering and frustration for most of their lives. Schopenhauer adopted Kant’s metaphysical concept of “thing-in-itself,” and identified it with will, and believed that suffering is essential to all life. Will, as Russell notes, is characteristic of much nineteenth-and twentieth-century philosophy. For Schopenhauer, Will, though metaphysically fundamental, is ethically evil, “the source of all our endless suffering” (Russell, 1946/2005, p. 682).

The Stoic indifference reiterates the Stoic view of determinism aforementioned with a humanistic attitude that avoids emotion and promotes a self-alignment with “fate,” that is, anything given by life (meaning, by God or Nature) is a “gift” that is under people’s power. However, the Stoic indifference was not simply indifferent in the way one is indifferent today. As Epictetus explained in his *Discourses* (trans. 2008), indifference is “tantamount to knowledge, opinion, or ignorance” (II.6.1). It is one kind of *indifferentia* that is with gratitude, which Corey Anton (2009) terms as “grateful indifference.” This Stoic attitude relates to Nietzsche’s conception of being grateful towards those who have done harmful deeds, when he says, “...I find an opportunity for expressing my gratitude to the ‘evil-doer’” (see *Ecce Homo*, trans., 2000b, “Why I am so Wise,” p. 5). Thus, Stoic gratitude differs from a “debt account of gratitude” (functioning as a kind of debt) and a “recognition account of gratitude” (better suited to people’s everyday experiences) that the contemporary educational philosophers describe (see

White, 1999). According to Mark Jonas (2011), many theorists (e.g., Berger, 1975; Simmons, 1979; Walker 1981; McConnell, 1993) believe that “the feeling of gratitude is only appropriate when it is directed towards those who have intentionally conferred a benefit” (p. 4). To this psychology of gratitude, it is not the actions of *others* that are essential to the experience of gratitude, but rather the attitude of the individual (see Jonas, 2011, p. 8).

Stoic grateful indifference, I thus posit, is not a contingent but rather an ontological principle that enables one to embrace a gratitude of being bestowed with life, and gives confidence in understanding what is and is not under one’s control. Within this lies a kind of endurance of suffering and/or hardships, while with this, there is a certain coldness in the Stoic conception of virtue; a kind of “coldness” which advocates that nothing matters to you except your own virtue (Russell, 1946/2005, p. 244). Put another way, the Stoic does not seek to become virtuous in order to do good, but does good in order to be virtuous. What people can do in their power is to use their will, and what is good for them is their virtue, obtained by doing virtuous acts. Similarly for Aristotle, a virtuous person is one who does virtuous things or makes virtuous judgments, but one must learn to be a virtuous person by making such judgments. Exercise of such resembles Confucian virtue in ritual practice. In this view, we find ourselves in “the ethical version of hermeneutic circle” (Flynn, 2006, p.124) of our choice and action. Virtue, for Stoics, is the sole good in the life of an individual man. Virtue resides in the will of people, and nothing outside of it can deprive one of virtue. (Refer to the similar metaphysical idea of virtue of Mengzi that follows.)

Thus, Stoicism advocates the practice of virtues such as courage, forbearance,

temperance, and good will towards others alike. Marcus (trans. 2006) believed that if one ponders the true virtues (goods) “there are wisdom, for example, self-control, justice, courage” (5.12). It is not difficult to discern that the Stoic admired and respected human virtues, through which humanism was manifested. The Stoics Cicero<sup>16</sup> and Seneca<sup>17</sup> whom I have not mentioned here, are characterized by humanism. (I will return to the subject of humanism—one of the key themes of my thesis—in Chapter 2.) It was Cicero who formed the very concept of “humanism”—a view of life that places the individual at its core. Some years later, Seneca announced: “to mankind, mankind is holy” (as cited in Garrder, 1996, 4, p. 132). This has remained a slogan for humanism. Like Stoicism, Chinese ancient traditions and modern Western philosophies (e.g., existentialism) focused their attention on humanity and humanism, aspects of which I shall explore more fully in the following sections.

***Chinese wisdom traditions.*** There are three main rich and longstanding schools of classical Chinese philosophy: Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism) and Buddhism. Although each has its ways of viewing fate concerning death and suffering, they all concern the questions of how we should take up death, suffering, and happiness, namely, how we should act in real life. In many ways, these traditions, shared by Greco-Roman Stoics and Epicureans as I have reviewed, take on a deterministic position about fate and humanity; that is, all natural processes, such as sickness and death, follow an unbreakable destiny. In this section, I shall focus on the two most influential traditions—first

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<sup>16</sup> Cicero, Marus Tullius (106-43 B.C.E.), Roman orator and statesman; importantly, as the transmitter of Greek ideas in Latin. He was an eclectic who had sympathy with Stoicism, but was opposed to the system of Epicurus.

<sup>17</sup> Seneca, Lulus Annaeus (4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.), Roman statesman and a trenchant expositor of Stoicism.

Confucianism and then Daoism. (Although the latter is generally viewed as preceding the former, the divide is still not clear.)

In Confucius's teaching, one's fate or destiny is "equated with natural, unavoidable processes such as ageing and dying, which we may be able to delay by our own efforts but not prevent altogether" (Collinson et al., 2000, pp. 230-231). It is one's ethical duty and an enactment of being wise to face all human misfortunes. In his teaching of wisdom, Confucius said, "To perform the obligations properly due to the people; and to pay reverence to ghosts and spirits, while keeping a distance from them—this may be called wisdom" (*The Analects of Confucius*, 6:20, my translation). Confucius's metaphysic of destiny, namely, Heaven or Spirit—"神" (*Shen*, meaning, Lord or God in the Western tradition)—consists mainly in his humanistic and ritual practice. Confucius said to one of his pupils, famous Zilu, that for a long time he himself had been praying to the spirits above [God or supernatural beings] and the terrestrial divinities below [earth deities] (see *Analects*, 7:34, my translation).

It is important here to bring Mengzi (or Mencius, 371-289 B. C. E.) a leading figure in Confucianism, to the discussion. Unlike his Master Confucius, Mengzi believed, while speaking little of religious beliefs or practices, that serving Heaven lies not in ritual offerings but in self-cultivation. For Mengzi, whatever happens is the mandate of Heaven, or Soul. He said in one of the "Four Books,"<sup>18</sup> *Mengzi*, which carries his name:

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<sup>18</sup> *Four Books* are the four major writings of Confucianism—called—one main topic, among many others (e.g., politics, ethics, law, education, etc.). The pivotal idea of Confucianism is "Jen."—a feeling of compassion, concerning of well being of others. Every activity should be carried out in accordance with virtues such as benevolence, duty, property, intuition and trust, and every man live up to the virtues and this live a good life.

There is nothing that does not have its mandate, and one should accord with the mandate and accept it in its uprightness. But those who truly understand what is mandated will not stand beneath a crumbling wall. Those who die having perfected the Way [Dao 道] have rendered the mandate upright, but those who die in manacles and shackles have not. (*Mengzi*, trans. 1995, 7.2, p. 59)

In this metaphysical determinism, like that of the Stoics, Mengzi sought to promote an inner freedom and strength in the “mandate.” He made one of his famous teachings in “告子下篇” (“The Book of Teaching Children, II”),

When Heaven intends to bestow a great mission on a person, it makes him suffer in mind and body. It makes him endure starvation, and subjects him to poverty, difficulties and all kinds of tests so as to harden his will power, toughen his nature and increase his capacities. (*Mengzi*, trans. 2006, 2.15, pp. 198-99)

In praising human minds for dealing with suffering, Mengzi said that human beings have “four minds,”<sup>19</sup> distinguished in humanity, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom. These

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<sup>19</sup> Four minds: a mind of commiseration, a mind of shame and dislike, a mind of respect and reverence, and a mind that distinguishes right and wrong. Mengzi said: The mind of commiseration is humanity; the mind of shame and dislike is righteousness; the mind of respect and reverence is ritual; the mind of that distinguishes right and wrong is wisdom. Humanity, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom are not instilled in us from outside. It’s just that we have them ourselves but do not usually think about them. Some people are twice what others are, some are five times what others are, still others differ to an incalculable degree. This is only because some people have not fully developed their natural gifts. (see *Mengzi*, 6.6-7).

four minds are tied with their emotion and goodness (or virtue), as Mengzi saw human mind (or heart) as a nexus of four innate feelings that can be cultivated into corresponding moral virtues. In this respect Mengzi's idea about emotion differed from those shared by the Stoics and Epicureans I have presented earlier, when he said, "If people accord with their emotions, then they can do what is good; this is what is meant by goodness" (Mencius, 1995, trans. 6.6-7, p. 57). On this view, Mengzi emphasized, "All people have a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others" (2.6), because all people have a mind of commiseration—the mind of humanity. That is, they must show sympathy and compassion towards those who suffer. Here Mengzi regarded commiseration and humanity as the same. Like his Master Confucius, as well as his contemporary Greco-Roman Stoic philosophers, Mengzi valued the virtuous quality of humanity, in that people are made capable of suffering in mind and body so as to harden their will power for greater mission bestowed from Heaven and that they can commiserate the suffering of others.

Mengzi's determinist view of virtue and will power is manifested in a conviction that the mind of humanity is not instilled in us from outside (like Stoic virtue that resides in the will power of people and cannot be deprived of them). It is just that we have it ourselves but do not usually think about them. That is why Mengzi alluded to the saying, "Seek it and you will find it, neglect it and you will lose it" (trans. 1995, 6.6-7, p. 57). The reemphasis of ritual virtuous practice in Confucianism parallels the exercise of virtue in Stoicism. This Confucian ontological idea of humanity in its relation to the epistemology of human beings is expressed in another classic of Confucianism, *Great Learning*<sup>20</sup> (2006c):

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<sup>20</sup> *Great Learning*, another classic of the *Four Books* in Confucianism (refer to Notes 3) is a posthumous work of Confucius and a book for novices who aspire to be virtuous.

“The way of the great learning is to rid oneself of selfish desires and develop further one’s inherent virtues” (Ch. 1). Wisdom, as Mengzi (trans. 1995) viewed, is people’s duty and obligation to fully develop their natural gifts (6.6-7, p. 57). Here we discern that Mengzi emphasized human ethical responsibility and resources echoed by the Stoics, who took what happened as the gift of life and found what was inherent to us and what was under our power.

Now let me proceed with Lao Zi, the founder of Daoism. Lao Zi’s metaphysic of human beings—the Dao of human life—lies in the “Dao of Heaven,” or the “Dao of Nature.” The idea in Daoism emphasizes a person’s self-identification with Nature, unconditioned pursuit of spontaneity and absolute freedom from social ambitions, or other desires. Lao Zi’s metaphysic of “Dao” is embodied throughout his *Dao De Jing* (i.e., *Tao-Te Ching/DDJ* or *The Book of Lao Zi*), which is developed from the notion of “Ming” 命, (Fate) in the pantheism prevailing since the Spring and Autumn Period (770-467, B.C.E.).

By contrast, Dao of Heaven is bestowed with naturalness and selflessness, symbolic of equality as Heaven’s Dao treats all things alike, favouring “ten thousands of things” (“Wanwu” 万物) of the universe, but always siding with the good. (*DDJ*, Ch. 79). Dao’s treating all things equally is likened to Marcus Aurelius’s (trans. 2006) indifference of Nature: “By ‘universal Nature treating these things indifferently’ I mean that they happen impartially by cause and effect to all that comes into being” (9. 1.[5]). Not entirely relying on the indifference of Nature, humans ought to know, “In the same way, life is indifferent, but the use we make of it is not indifferent” (Epictetus, trans. 2008, II. 6.1). The Dao of Heaven “reduces the excessive and supplements the

insufficient” (Ch. 77, my translation), whereas the Dao of people, characterized with acquisitiveness, selfishness and inequality, “abate the already insufficient and provide for the already excessive” (Ibid.).

Between the distinction of the Dao of Heaven and Man, lies Lao Zi’s Dao of dialectics, one of the greatest contributions made to the maturity in Chinese philosophy (Wang, 1998). This dialectic Dao is well encompassed in these lines:

Revision is Dao’s movement,  
Weakness is Dao’s usefulness.

(*DDJ*, Ch. 40, my translation)

A dialectic interrelation between the opposite reflects the interaction as a return to the unity/union of opposites. The former reveals the state of being opposite, while the latter the state of transformation or change. This may be manifested by the traditional symbol of *Tai Ji*—“Great Acme”—in which the two forces known as *Yin* (阴) and *Yang* (阳) are always on the move, interdependent and interacting at the same time, hence embedded in each other. The Dao of dialectics always straddles two opposites: the good and evil, happiness and pain, the beautiful and the ugly, gains and losses, fortune and misfortune. He said,

People of the world know these things: Knowing the beautiful as beauty already knows the ugly as ugliness. Recognizing the virtuous as virtue already recognizes the wicked as wickedness.

(*DDJ*, Ch. 2, my translation)



Misfortune is that beside which fortune lies.

Fortune is that beneath which misfortune lurks. (Ibid., Ch. 58)

This idea of dialectic is available in *Meditations*: “a hindrance to a given work is turned to its furtherance, an obstacle in a given path becomes an advance” (Marcus Aurelius, trans. 2006, 5.20). This is Stoic belief that human mind “adapts and turns any obstacle to action to serve its objective” (Ibid.).

Lao Zi’s doctrine of Dao (the Way) is naturalistic. The Dao of People or wisdom of human existence is fundamentally exemplified via the attitude toward life itself and its natural end—death. Almost all living beings are afraid to suffer and die, especially human beings. The love of life and fear of suffering and death seem to be connected with natural instinct in the case of mankind. Lao Zi observed that what hinders human freedom could be a double complex related to life and death (Wang, 1998, p. 11). For him, life and death are as natural as anything else in the world, because “[p]eople come alive into being and go dead into earth” (Ch. 50, my translation) (this saying has since become a well-said Chinese proverb, “Chu Sheng Ru Si” 出生入死). Lao Zi sought to remind people: to live their lives as naturally as possible so that they can enjoy them; not to be crushed by the tragic sense of death that befalls all men alike. This was echoed by Stoics and Epicureans. Thus, the wisdom of life is also reflected in the sensibility and awareness of the necessity of “being content,” which is assumed to yield “constant happiness,” (Ch. 46). He famously said, “Five colours blind one’s eyes, five tones deafen one’s ears, and five flavours dull one’s palate” (*DDJ*, Ch. 12, my translation). It is clear

that Lao Zi wanted people to be content with what they have and to take what happen to them as they were. Thus, the humanistic dimension of Daoism consists in personal cultivation from within—then chiefly oriented to the realization of “Dao” as the supreme principle and nourishment and “De” (德), as the highest virtue.

### ***More Philosophical Debates about Suffering in Virtue of Human Responsibility***

The ancient philosophies of suffering I have just discussed saw their task as one of bringing ethical vigilance and duty into complete alignment with oneself. However, it is important to point out that the classical focus on humanity in terms of suffering and death, as shown in the above analysis, mostly concerns the metaphysical meaning of suffering in the sense of human fate and destiny and our attitude toward it. That suffering and hardships in Stoicism are to be understood with a kind of “grateful” indifference—taking suffering as a “gift” or as necessary condition for cultivating fuller humanity (in Mengzi)—may not make sense in a modern mind. The perplexing idea is expressed in the work of many modern writers. Amato (1990) posits, “Stoicism and Epicureanism express a type of resignation to which only a rare person can consent and no living culture can permanently adopt” (p. 37), because, he goes on to say, most people cannot even conceive of the desirability of bearing one’s suffering alone and, especially, dispassionately. This is not to say that the classical philosophers aforementioned implied any sort of “desirability” in suffering. Their emphasis on suffering’s metaphysical nature lies in the cosmic and historical point of view. They helped to lead us to more humanistic epistemological aspirations and responsibility.

Earlier, Jeremy Bentham<sup>21</sup> (1969/1976) voiced the aspirations of a new humanity, which contradicted the Greco-Roman and Chinese thinking alike in assuming that man could live without sacrifices and falling victim, and that a rational understanding and an ethical calculus of earthly pleasure and pain were not only possible but also desirable. The idea of “grateful indifference” was certainly alien to Bentham’s life and thought. For him, suffering is nothing but pain, misery and unhappiness, and has no value in itself. A Benthamian technological outlook on the world denies the forces of Nature that Stoics and Confucians found very important. On this latter view, how we choose to embrace our existence must then get beyond these technical or scientific (or rather, calculating) views of the world and accept humanity’s weakness in relationship with goods and things of divine order.

However, in Amato’s (1990) words, “It was not a necessary price people must pay for their own integrity or service to their gods” (p. 79), and thus needs to be eliminated. Nietzsche, in his *Gay Science* (2001), repudiated both Stoics and Epictetus, for their “amor fati”—the principle of (grateful) indifference. According to Russell (1946/2005), Nietzsche (1844-1900) developed Schopenhauer’s oriental ethic of renunciation (particularly, Indian Buddhism), but held that the will has ethical as well as metaphysical primacy (p. 687). Nietzsche’s writing on ethics and his criticism of religion made him influential, especially on modern existentialism.

Modern humanists argue that individuals should be autonomous, free to think for

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<sup>21</sup> For Jeremy Bentham’s view of suffering, pain, and happiness, also see David Baumgardt, *Bentham and the Ethics of Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, pp. 98-105); Ernest Albee’s *A History of English Utilitarianism* (New York: 1962, p. 181).

themselves and possessed of rights that define their responsibilities, responsive to their existential conditions. Existentialists would be interested in taking these existential matters as an historical phenomenon, symptomatic of a difficult period, for instance, the Holocaust in the Western history, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution in one of the Eastern. In philosophy, Grayling (2009) notes, existentialism is “not a substantive contribution to the age-old ethical debate” (p. 197), in debates such as justice, suicide, and abortion. For existentialist ethics is the one of authenticity, which mainly invites us to examine the authenticity of our personal lives and of our society, offering us in the long run “an ethical *style* than a moral content” (Flynn, 2006, p. 78). That is, existentialists counsel people how to live, but not offer people moral “recipes” for those ethical debates. However, existentialism still has great to offer, as Thomas Lynn (2006) asserts, existentialism is as current as the human condition which it examines, much that have been included in the writings of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. It is without question that the topic of suffering, terror and death, according to Lachte (1994/2008), is seemingly related to modern existentialism represented by Jean-Paul Sartre (see his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 2010).<sup>22</sup> Death, for Sartre, is unrealizable in that “my death” is foreign to “my” experience; it is a vicarious thing in that “I” can observe other’s dying and imagine “myself” in that condition. Writers within the Christian tradition, such as Augustine (trans.1998), Pascal (trans. 2009, 2011) and Kierkegaard (trans. 2008), have written penetratingly about human suffering and finitude, and they have strongly influenced later humanists and existentialists. It is Kierkegaard, in

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<sup>22</sup> In 1945, Sartre spends the first half of the year in the United States as one of a number of French journalists invited to observe its war efforts. In October he delivered “Existentialism Is a Humanism” to a packed audience in Paris.

particular, whose work on despair (see “The Dynamics of Despair” in *The Sickness unto Death*), some believe, is pivotal in charting the history of the philosophy of suffering in the Western tradition. In this work, Kierkegaard provides an incisive analysis of the modes or ways we embrace our existence through despair and suffering. For Kierkegaard, our self being is a conscious synthesis of paradoxes (the finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity). And when a person transcends despair he or she is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, but rather to become an individual in synthesis, all in relationship with God. This reflects, as discussed above, on the all-in-relationship, order with God, divine Nature in ancient Greek and Chinese classic Daoist thought.

If we were to value Ciceroianism and Confucianism, as Michael Mahoney (2005) suggests, for humanism in the modern sense, we would value their belief in the value of human individual. Thus, the philosophy of suffering is reflected in modern existentialism because it is commonly acknowledged that existentialism is a philosophy about the concrete individual. (For Flynn, this is both its “glory” and its “shame.”) Individuals attempt to come to terms with this mortality and humanness as existential aspiration and ethical responsibility, as its main proponent Sartre calls the “free organic individual,” that is, the flesh-and-blood agent. On this view, we become existential individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions, especially when impersonal space and time—“a truth to die for” (as philosophy of suffering I have earlier reviewed)—can be personalized and brought into the domain of our choice and responsibility (Flynn, p. 7). This is an application of Nietzsche’s advice (or even a maxim) to “become what you are.” Gordon Marino (2010) rightly comments on this very principle of life that existentialists hold—to

live is to invariably confront with making ethical choices, that is, living a life is about what to choose and how to choose, about the ethics of living. This ethic of living is in its basic sense about humanism. And our existence necessarily abides “within the chilly coordinates of constant choice.”

Michael Clark (2002) argues that it is irrational to praise or blame people for what is not wholly within their control, because “ought implies can”<sup>23</sup> (p. 135)—the notion itself is certainly Kantian (see Kant, trans. 2007). Basically, the point of this assertion is that we should only be held morally responsible for those actions and decisions we can actually carry out. To further understand it, the argument may also suggest that our actions stem from our characters, but as contingent circumstances and causal factors are often beyond our control, their outcome is often unpredictable. In such cases, “luck appears to play a large part in determining our character and conduct, for both of which we are morally accountable” (Clark, 2002, p. 135). In order to hold us morally responsible for the decisions and actions that we make in the face of such contingent condition as suffering, we need also to understand the ethical status of suffering and its importance in education.

### **Ethical Matters of Suffering Concerning Moral Education**

What really raises one’s indignation against suffering is not suffering intrinsically, but the senselessness of suffering.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, n.d.

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<sup>23</sup> Many philosophers use the principle “*Ought* implies *can*” as a basic test of moral obligation. Kant seems to have been the first philosopher to explicitly formulate the principle: “since reason commands that such actions should take place, it must be possible for them to take place” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A807/B835, translation by Norman Kemp Smith).

It is necessary as well as natural at this point to relate the philosophy of suffering to moral education, in a more specific sense, the education of suffering (the focal view of this section) and ask what it means to educate people to be wise in dealing with suffering. Metaphysically (or “intrinsically” to understand Nietzsche), suffering and death, contingent or necessary, are not moral in nature, but our sensitivity to them and our ways of tackling them are ethical and moral. Philosophy of suffering is philosophy of wisdom—of truth and reality. In antiquity, as shown earlier, much has been given as examples of virtue and lessons in moral truth in human misfortunes and afflictions. Further consideration has been given to the role education can and should play in the understanding of such moral truth as central to the moral development of youth.

Studies of suffering and moral analyses, as I described at the beginning of this chapter, are found in richly diverse research literature. According to many authors (Williams, 1981; Nagel 1976/1979; Rosebury, 1995), our ethic of life and suffering consists mainly in how we are brought up under our particular circumstances of life. This is that our choices are constrained by causal factors as not always predictable—the contingent circumstances. What can we hold ourselves accountable for in this suffering situation—our own suffering and the suffering of others? Bernard Williams (1981) says that “anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not” (p. 59). Psychologists, psychiatrists, and behavioural scientists have attempted penetrating examinations of the problem of suffering (Mahoney, 2005; Goldberg, 2001).

But, as Carl Goldberg critiques, they have eschewed “its etiology as a moral issue, they have left it to philosophers and theologians to explain” (p. 13). For the purpose of

analysis in this chapter, I shall focus, in the passages below, on the moral issues of suffering as philosophical and educational aspirations.

### ***Moral Aspects of Suffering Complicated for Education***

Amato (1990), stepping beyond the classical metaphysical arena of suffering into the politics of suffering, has made a timely inquiry into empathy and reason implicated in contemporary conscience, public rhetoric and moral standards, hence the criteria for education of suffering. By joining “philosophy and history” (p. xxiii), he investigates perplexing aspects of suffering experienced by one’s self and by others. Emphasizing a humanistic view, Amato puts his work to people’s ability to empathize with the suffering of others and to withstand one’s own, while critically looking “at the matter of suffering as a good and a right” (p. xxiv).

In emphasizing one’s moral limits in the face of suffering, Shelly Kagan (1989) suggests that we can substitute “promoting the good” for “relieving suffering (p. 368). That good, as I understand it, can be understood as Stoic virtue—the sole good in the life of an individual person, Aristotelian virtue of the soul or the excellence of character, or Confucian human benevolence and the four innate minds of goodness, and Daoist (Lao Zi’s) highest virtue—the Way of Nature and People. (Aristotle’s and Confucius’s highest or peak virtue will be exemplified in Chapter 5.) All these need to be exercised and cultivated from within, connecting their will power (for Stoics), the alignment of emotion with reason—what is right to do or the “virtuous activity of the soul” (for Aristotle), and ritual practice and self-cultivation (for Confucius and Mengzi) and the realization of Dao (for Lao Zi). This kind of exercise, similar in many ways to Socratic and Platonic



exercise of death, calls for people's inclinations and their social values that depend heavily on their upbringing. This leads us to consider the value of education of suffering in the formation of the good—virtue, or, in the upbringing and cultivation of what is intrinsically good or virtuous.

As analyzed earlier, suffering is commonly regarded as a moral wrong—"bad"—and this badness, therefore, should be eliminated or needs to be made right by psychotherapies or health care. Jamie Mayerfeld, in *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (1999), offers a thorough account of the nature of suffering and argues for the view that its badness imposes a universal "prima facie duty to relieve suffering" (p. 9). As he claims, his moral intuition of suffering aims for moral inquiry into identifying "wrong kinds of behaviour so that we can avoid them" (p. 7). In his justification for a prima facie duty to try to avoid suffering, Meyerfeld insists that "suffering is bad and ought not to occur....Its occurrence makes the world much worse" (p. 111).

F. A. Carnevale's (2009) analysis, in concert with many others (e.g., Frankl, 1984/1959), shows that understandings of suffering are value laden (p. 173). Carnevale provides an epistemological and moral examination of suffering, and examines such specific aspects as the meaning, assessment and, in particular, the moral significance of suffering. In responses to one's own suffering, one finds personal meaning in their plight that allows them to transcend their anguish (e.g., Goldberg, 2001; Carnevale, 2009); while assessment or confrontation of the suffering of another can "encourage students to assume social responsibility" (Todd, 2001, p. 597), and calls for ethical caring as in the writings of Nel Noddings (1984). Carnevale (2009) suggests that "suffering can be better understood, through the practice of empathic attunement" (p. 173), suggesting the need

for ethical encounters in the very formation of social responsibility and compassion. In these associations, compassion is often described in terms of suffering, as an attitude or action of “suffering-with” the other (from the Latin *com*—together, and *pati*—to suffer).

Ronald Miller (2004) studies the psychological and psychotherapeutic treatment of suffering as moral engagement. The social and moral aspects of suffering are also discussed in C. R. Williams (2008), Liz Frost and Paul Hoggett (2008), and Pedro Ruiz and Ramon Miguez (2001). Williams in particular addresses the sociological aspects of suffering and injustice in contemporary western society and presses for a collective sense of value and more embodiment of compassion. The ethic of responsibility, understood as a moral requirement, demanding a new moral aspiration in individual and sociocultural relationships, “is posited as the moral instrument through which human beings may be liberated from misery and suffering” (Ruiz & Miguez, 2001, p. 155). As such, the educational implications of such include the need to place the understanding of suffering and learning of ethical potential at the core of the educational process as an alternative to those conceptions that reduce education to the mere acquisition of knowledge. To further understand suffering and learn our ethical ability, I shall now move to some contemporary views on suffering and its involvement in education.

### ***Contemporary Scholarship on the Education of Suffering***

The “education of suffering,” an expression I borrow from Mark Jonas (2010, p. 46), is a response to suffering conditions and a responsibility for human existence. Integral to moral education, the education of suffering provides educational discourses and venues for opening eyes to life, possibilities and hopes—in short, an ethics of living. It is because,

in this respect, ethics of living highlights how we may wrestle with who we are and with what weight we can give to our morality with the human condition. That is, when grappling with suffering, we grapple with what life we identify, with what we decide to embrace and to act.

Let us first turn our attention to understanding the inherent relation between suffering and education—an ontological position that views the tragic in virtue of education or the educative in virtue of the tragic. Philosophers of education such as Nicholas Burbules and Rene Arcilla have articulated this paradoxical aspect of education. Burbules (1990, 1997) has advanced an unusual perspective toward the possibilities and limits of education, which he calls the tragic sense of education. Burbules's tragic perspective reflects a dialectic of education in its very nature: the contradictory character of the educative and the educated, that is, educational endeavours consist in possibilities and limits, gains and losses, and it is “by an appreciation that certain educational goals or purposes can only be obtained at the cost of others” (1997, p. 1). Arcilla (1992) views this tragic sense from the lens of both the ontological and epistemological nature of education. In rightly discerning the metaphysically conflicting relationships of the tragic, suffering and education,<sup>24</sup> Arcilla postulates that the tragic itself (including suffering, death, misfortune) “has an educative force” (p. 480). He thus urges us to appreciate the fact that human suffering is not just contingent but “it is in one of its dimensions a tragic fate” (p. 474). In arguing for the tragic perspective for education, both Arcilla and Burbules call for an understanding of educational commitment and endeavours “in the

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<sup>24</sup> See Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*: the intrinsic tragic quality of education here echoes Nietzsche's dialectic of the Dionysian and Apollonian forces of the tragic effect.

face of tragic outcomes.” For them, the tragic sense of education represents and provides a constructive and educative sense of thinking about education itself and what it can and cannot achieve.

These educational philosophers provide us with insight into the dynamic of tragic conflicts in education. Such insight is proper to conceptualize the tragic and suffering in real life and with education. Although it has not been adequately developed or addressed in theory or practice, the education of suffering has inspired pertinent writings (Stillwaggon, 2010; Mintz, 2008a, 2008b; Jonas, 2010). In his recent work on the necessary connection between suffering and education, James Stillwaggon (2010), describes education as a process of suffering. Using George Orwell’s autobiographical story, “Such, Such Were the Joys” as an account of his childhood education, a site of conflicting views on childhood, Stillwaggon views this educational process of suffering in the loss of childhood and inquires into the adult subject’s maintenance of such loss in memory.

In concert with Stillwaggon’s view that education *per se* is “a process of suffering,” Avi Mintz (2008a) explores the role of pain in education through considering proverbial wisdom about the general cultural sentiment behind “no pain, no gain.” Mintz engages with one of the fiercest public debates about pain and education to demonstrate the productive nature of the pains of learning. He posits that recognizing the value of a certain degree of suffering leads to a more adequate understanding of learning. In this he articulates an educationally relevant conception of self-esteem, one aspect of moral self. On this view, he further asserts a connection between learning and difficulty, and suggests that talking about the role of pain in education is a way to cultivate learning dispositions

and personal virtue. In Mintz's (2008b) observation, educational practices in Anglo-American education have a tendency to alleviate student suffering. This tendency can be detrimental because, according to Mintz, certain kinds of suffering actually enhance student learning. In *The Happy and Suffering Student?* (in press), Mintz reconstructs Rousseau's theory of the educational value of pain<sup>25</sup> and revives the progressive education of "distinguishing the valuable educational pains from harmfully ones" (p. 1). The emphasis here is to understand the importance of suffering through education, in order that "harmful" suffering can be limited. Thus, eventually, "learning can and should be pleasurable and painless" (Ibid.)

Mark Jonas (2010) has argued that the development of self-mastery in human beings through suffering ought to be the ultimate goal of education. While in support of Mintz's compelling argument against the detrimental effects of educators' desires to alleviate suffering in students, Jonas points out one of the roots of such desires that Mintz fails to examine: the feeling of "compassion" or "pity" (which Jonas uses synonymously). As a result, Jonas argues lucidly for the importance of compassion in the education of suffering. As Burbules and Arcilla want us to discern the possibilities and limits of education, Jonas (2010) raises awareness about compassion's "promises and pitfalls" in the context of education (p. 46). In the belief that compassion, necessary to help students learn, leads many teachers to unreflectively alleviate student struggles, Jonas, however, urges that compassion must at times be overcome. Jonas's position on compassion derives from Rousseau and Nietzsche, who argue that compassion is a powerful

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<sup>25</sup> In his influential educational book, *Emile* (1979), Rousseau pointedly writes about the importance of an education in suffering: "to suffering is the first thing he ought to learn and the thing he will most need to know" (p. 78).

educational force but that it must be properly employed. According to Jonas, compassion is necessary to develop self-mastery in human beings (for both Rousseau and Nietzsche); but the compassion must be one that must hurt in order to help. Thus, Jonas's encouragement of thoughtful reflection on the uses and abuses of compassion in education in turn reinforces embracing suffering in education.

Much of the recent research on the concept of suffering in education supports the relevance of suffering to education considered to reinforce and sustain legitimate educational aspirations. Although in social justice education suffering is generally regarded as something to be eliminated (see Todd, 2001, 2002; Mayo, 2004; Berlak, 2004; Mintz, 2008b), many have made a case for pedagogically appropriate or necessary suffering in the service of social justice education, in keeping with moral concern for the marginalized other.). One aim of social justice education is the alleviation or eradication of suffering that arises from oppressive social relations. Social justice education has its core objective to be aware of the suffering of others, which brings about its own sort of suffering. Megan Boler (1999, 2004) has called for a "pedagogy of discomfort" to highlight the importance of certain pains in education. The existing literature on education of suffering has tended to lament what is frequently at best the very limited success of such endeavours in achieving their aims, and at worst a betrayal (or failure) of those aims.

It is clear that the purpose of the education of suffering is not to transmit and develop a knowledge of suffering, but to deliver and apply an ethics of living, to be wise enough to face our existential conditions. In other words, the education of suffering is moral education but not devoid of scientific spirit. It leads the individual toward self-realization, which is to

say, to becoming fully human through embodiment of the qualities of *neisheng* (inner sageliness) and *waiwang* (outer kingliness) (Yu, 2002, p. 72). For that reason, modern education could derive benefit from the still vital attitudes and values of Confucian tradition. Educating for moral agency is, to my mind, essential for the education of suffering and a good preparation for living an ethical and educative life.

In addressing the question of how the inevitability of human suffering affects our understanding of education, many theorists (e.g., Stillwaggon, 2010; Mintz, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, and others) have shown that education is one of the primary ways that we learn how to suffer, and that “how to suffer” is one of the most important lessons learned from various educational practices that try to teach us lots of other things, from washing hands to calculus. If it is important to look at education in order to understand the basic fact of human suffering as aforementioned, it is equally important, I would argue, to think about suffering in order to understand education. The former position wants us to understand that we suffer because we are incomplete and education both compensates for this incompleteness and teaches us how to accept suffering and this incompleteness at the same time. However, the latter urges us to reflect on suffering and to understand the importance of suffering in education; that is, we suffer because we are not only incomplete but also resourceful (capable) in coping with this incompleteness, and education is to cultivate such ability—moral agency.

## Chapter 2. Key Themes and Concepts Examined and Defined

Other things made him [man] suffer too, in the main he was a *sickly* animal: but suffering itself was *not* his problem, but the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, ‘Suffering for *what?*’ Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering.

—Nietzsche (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, essay 3, aphorism 28)

### Introduction

As is outlined in the preceding chapter, this thesis addresses questions of how to define agency, the meaning of a good life obtained out of suffering, and what education can do to cultivate a robust moral agency overcoming and transcending such particular human conditions as misfortune and despair. Thus we enter into the realms of both metaphysics and ethics, calling for educational aspirations and commitment. To this end, this thesis is framed within a large terrain of perspectives: ontological vision of the moral self and the world (physical and societal), applied philosophy (e.g., ethical and aesthetic theories), wherein the theory of soul and virtue ethics play an integral role, necessary for discussing the possibility of cultivating and developing moral agency embodied in such virtues as humility, compassion, empathy, bravery, self-direction, self-overcoming, self-mastering.

Ancient Greek and classical Chinese ethical thought are central to my examination of this work: both focus on right conduct while modern ethical theorists tend



to see ethics as a way to determine the rule for right conduct. Aristotle and Confucius as well as their followers think that ethics should provide a right account of *eudemonia* (“happiness”). The Aristotelian ethical sense of the good is happiness, and this goodness (or happiness) is an activity of the soul. And both Aristotle’s theory of soul (intellectual and moral virtue) and Confucius’s idea of 仁 *Ren* or 仁义 *Renyi* (the goodness of spirituality) are crucial because, as we shall see, they argue that mankind achieves the best by fully developing the potentials of human soul in virtue of goodness. It is on this related view of the East and the West that I premise my argument in developing the potential of humanity that is embodied in each individual’s moral self and agency, which can serve as a necessary condition for all forms of *eudaimonia* (human well-being, flourishing, and/or happiness).

Thus, in this chapter I wish to look in more depth at what the key concepts and themes in both philosophy and education of suffering previously sketched and reviewed (e.g., suffering and humanism, virtue and moral agency, etc.) will mean for the purpose of this thesis. I will take the opportunity to consider some more recent writings in the field as compared with the more classical sources drawn upon in the previous chapter. The emphasis will be placed on philosophical questions that arise in contemplating the educative nature of suffering and the cultivation of moral agency. The examination is interspersed with personal narratives as illustrative examples. In so doing, I take forward my stories of suffering as both hermeneutical phenomenology of lived experiences and interpretive epistemology of the examined life, as a way to encourage open discourse as the heart of inquiry, and a deeper recognition of the fundamental role of the moral “self” in the face of any and all human suffering. I thus argue about the descriptive (as narrative)

and reflective (as hermeneutic) sophistication of a metaphysical and ethical consideration of philosophy of suffering in relation to moral education of suffering and the ways in which, in my view, this gives rise to the need for more educative attention to, and reflexivity about, existential questions and individual experiences.

### **Justifying Moral Agency in a Defensible Notion of Suffering**

#### ***Ontological Privilege: Humanistic Position and Ethics of Individual Responsibility***

Human nature, as Confucian philosopher Mengzi believed, tends toward the good as surely as water flows downhill; the reason human nature does not always realise its potential is due only to external circumstances. On this view, the realization of such potential is the development of their innate predispositions, because we are more innately endowed with certain “minds,” an expression that in Mengzi’s philosophy suggests attitudes, senses, or predispositions. In his articulation of these minds (e.g., a mind of commiseration with others, a mind of shame and dislike—in various ways viewed in the chapter above), Mengzi essentially held that all the qualities necessary to perfect human beings are already complete within themselves: they do not come from outside. This I view as the ontological privilege of human nature, of which humanism, I would argue, is a part.

Humanism, as a philosophical theory, is concerned with a godless understanding of the world and values, and places the human at the center of the universe, depending on what it takes “to be the greatest perfection attainable by a human being” as atheistic, religious, Marxist, Renaissance, Classical Greek, and the like (Flynn, 2006, p. 134). Humanism, a long

tradition of human history, has been the mainstay of both Eastern and Western ethics. In the Eastern tradition, its systematic inception is generally attributed to Confucius, who focused on people and their relationships, while in the Western tradition, it was Socrates who was said to bring philosophy from heaven down to earth (or from God down to people). These two earliest humanists, *par excellence*, as both centering on human beings, “sought to encourage his contemporaries to pay attention to the question of how they should live” (Grayling, 2009, p. 180). The core of Confucian ethical philosophy is about humans’ “Ren” and “Renyi” of “Junzi” (the benevolence and goodness of a gentleman). However, humanists also possess belief in Heaven or God as previously shown in Confucius, Lao Zi and Socrates, Cicero, Seneca—all relying on our common humanity (Cave, p. 4).<sup>26</sup>

Peter Cave (2009) relates the concept of *Humanism* to a variety of beliefs (e.g., God, religion, morality, politics, dying and living), These connections, involving concerns about “responsibility and self,” are about the nature of “morality, the good life, how best to understand the relationship between mind and body” (p. xi). Cave reminds us that “Humanists, as do we all, make frequent use of a concept—the self, ‘I,’ ‘me’” (p. 138), because when they make sense of their living, people have to relate to their selves, “we,” and “us.” This, I would further to argue, is an existential responsibility of mankind, because humanism tells us that “it is our own individual responsibility to do the best that we can”

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<sup>26</sup> As such humanists and these philosophers and thinkers have in common in recognizing that human beings have similar basic needs, interests and values, and through our rationality (in Socrates) and fellow feeling (in Confucius): Spinoza in his ethics (1677/2006), whose God stands within the universe (Nature), David Hume who set the Enlightenment humanist tone (Cave, p. 35), Nietzsche (version 2001), rejecting the existence of God with his “greatest weight” forces us to ask: how ought we to live, Heidegger (1974, Letter on Humanism), Emerson, who believed that people take the way from man, not to man.

(p. 147) under any conditions, and to be responsible for what we have done or shall do to ourselves, our decisions on our own life, and how we have lived in general. That is, humanism focuses on oneself as resource to make the best of our lives—lives that contain meaning and purpose even for the worst parts of lives as suffering and affliction. For Nietzsche tries to persuade us in his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (trans. 1994) that people can “will it [suffering],” if they are shown “a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering” (essay 3, aphorism 28). This simply means, “What can I live with?” in Cave’s (p. 147) expression, and, (I would add) What can I live for? and by extension, What can I suffer for?

The end of the humanistic position invariably concerns understanding how things are and how things ought to be. Humanism makes the distinction between facts and values, reality and attitude, seeking to make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values, and ultimately involves the key question in ethical concerns about how to live our lives—“about ethics,” to recall Marino (2010).

The word “ethics” came from the Greek word, *ethos*, which means custom, matter, habit or character. It concerns humans’ character, the moral element of human nature and their actions in terms of self-perfection. Aristotle was the first to suggest that ethics might be primarily a matter of individual conscience, and only secondarily, of social behaviour. In a modern view, the term “ethics” has two main related meanings. In its ordinary related use it denotes the principles and attitudes which regulate the behaviour of individuals, groups or corporate bodies, the aim being to identify what they ought to do, in the sense of identifying what is the right or good thing for them to do (see Baggini & Fosl, p. 173), and what life they can live or live with. Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, addresses concepts such as good, right, evil, wrong, moral obligation, duty, and of the kinds of reasoning (often called

practical reasoning or practical wisdom in Aristotelian term) used in working out what one should do in given circumstances, and more generally how one should live (Grayling, 2009; Baggini & Fosl, 2007). In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), the greatest work he completed, Aristotle dealt primarily with the nature of a good and moral life, how such a life is lived and what it means.

Aristotle believed that one views what one really is through what one does, e.g., a virtuous person is such by doing virtuous things and making virtuous judgments. Similar to the view, we obtain our virtue by acting virtuously (for Stoics) and ritual practice and self-perfection (for Confucius and Mengzi). In our actions we find ourselves in the ethical version of hermeneutic transcendence, challenging us to understand and realise our responsibility that entails the utmost prudence of the person. For Aristotle, the prudent person (*phronimos*) knows the right thing to do at the right time in the right circumstance. Such prudent person, I would add, not only “discovers” but also “decides” what is the right thing to do. In this respect, we may well say that the person is “creative” in having the choice in full recognition of the circumstance, hence making it the right choice by his or her follow-through. For me, humanism means making ethical choices in view of our existential condition, because human life is an ongoing choice. Our choice or our failure to choose is itself a choice for which we are responsible. Thus, a philosophy of suffering, and by extension, of horror and wisdom of tragedy, or ways of living as illustrated in Confucianism and Stoicism, are concerned with a commitment to humanism and ethics of living—the former is based on humanity and the latter on our best understanding of human nature and the human condition. These two realms, in essence implicate each other, together concerning practical reasoning

or Aristotelian “practical wisdom” (*Phronēsis*<sup>27</sup>). This kind of human wisdom, I would further to argue, encompasses the wisdom of tragedy and suffering, respecting humanity in the real world, to which the practical wisdom can be applied, and gives us agency through entailing a source of value and morality under given situations (e.g., suffering, death alike) vis-à-vis an empowered and liberated moral self or moral agency.

### ***Human Felicity: A Dialectic of Suffering and Happy Consciousness***

The concept of suffering generally concerns two aspects: the subjective (or psychological) empowered and liberated moral self or moral agency and objective (or physical). Some writers (e.g., Cassell) define suffering as implicitly a psychological accompaniment to pain. Others (e.g., van Hooft, Stan, 1998) define suffering as the frustration of the internal tendencies of all aspects of the person. (On this view, suffering can be seen as an objective condition irrespective of the mental states of the victim.) Still others, from sociopolitical point of view, divide suffering into personal suffering (Rubinstein & Black, 2004) and social suffering (e.g., Bourdieu, 1993; Frost & Hoggett, 2008). Rather than by a simple dichotomy of definition, I view “suffering,” the central conception of this thesis, from two related lenses, associative and dialectic. First, suffering is associated with diverse words, concepts, and emotions: such as tragedy, pain, chaos, afflictions, fears, anxiety, loss, torment, misery, humiliation and the like. Second, what is explicit in these associations, I assert, implies interactive associations. They are

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<sup>27</sup>*Phronēsis* (also *Fronesis*) is an ancient Greek word (intelligence, prudence) for “practical wisdom,” or knowledge of the proper ends of life, *Phronēsis* is distinguished by Aristotle (in *The Nicomachean Ethics*) from theoretical knowledge and mere means-end reasoning, or craft, and itself a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue, or the virtue of practical thought. See Dictionary of Philosophy (2005, p. 277).

“dialectic,” that is, in this wide range of concepts and emotions are their dialectic associations. In other words, their associative concepts and emotions exist simultaneously in their antithetical relations, such as suffering and happiness (or the absence of suffering<sup>28</sup>), pain and pleasure, fortune and misfortune, good and evil, right and wrong, etc.) For the discussion, I will take “suffering” and “happiness” as each other’s associative and dialectic partner.

While it may be a truism that knowing the beautiful as beauty already implies knowing the ugly as ugliness (for Lao Zi), it is rather more speculative to think either side of a paradox is both of itself and the negative of itself, or “*both at once*” (a Hegelian dialectic view). The opposing elements, though clearly and distinctively separated from one another come first to contradict, yet to reconcile, and then to re-determine or synthesize one another. A wide variety of relations are thus embraced—difference, opposition, reflection, relation, or transformation, with each insufficiency or limitation of a category aforesaid passing over into its opposite by distinction or negation.

Dialectic thought exists both in the Western and Eastern philosophies, e.g., in Daoism, Lao Zi’s Dao of Dialect and Mengzi’s dialectic view of suffering in self-cultivation, as discussed in Chapter 1. In the West dialectic goes back to earliest ancient Greek thought about their dialectic making of reality (Heraclitus)<sup>29</sup> and classical

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<sup>28</sup> Schopenhauer in his essay, “On the Suffering of the World” (2004), defines, “...the happiness of a given life is not to be measured according to the joys and pleasures it contains but according to the absence of the positive element, the absence of suffering” (p. 6).

<sup>29</sup> The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus (circa 500 BCE) observed that all matter is set in constant opposition, and everything turns into its opposite, with all coming, for example, from fire to which all shall return. For Heraclitus, fire is the soul, and he says, “[to] souls it is death to become water, to water death to become earth, but from earth water is born, and from water soul” (see Pojman, 2003). This is the earlier dialectical and negating relationship ever manifested.

philosophy (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle).<sup>30</sup> It was a topic in medieval philosophy but primarily in the modern philosophy of the 19th century (see Hegel and Marx). Hegel, “the master of dialectic,” incorporates Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato (Lavine, 1984, 210). Hegel’s dialectic, that yields the dynamically changing truths of the concepts, offers us a vision of dialectical reason, moving dynamically through tension, opposition, conflict, polarity, contradiction, toward resolution in a synthesis. This process of dynamic movement through each opposition to one another is a transformative one. In Hegel’s dialectical position, I take that the proper way to resolve dialectical paradoxes is not to suppress them, but to synthesize them. It is this synthetic resolution or determination of suffering and happiness that I am focusing on for the purpose of the discussion that follows. Happiness is the ultimate end for humans to achieve (in Aristotle). In order to achieve this goal, and, inevitably, suffering and human afflictions are brought into the peripheral vision of this happiness. Happiness “can be seen as capable of representing goodness, revealing the nature of goodness, or instructing us in goodness” (Baggini & Fosl, 2007, p. 1), and hence, as a way to reveal truth and represent beauty. From earlier

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<sup>30</sup>Socrates practiced his dialectic by “the use of argument in order to make the opponent contradict himself in the course of the famous Socratic method, with the result that Socrates would then solve the contradiction and be able to move to a true definition of the concept. This is defined as “the Socratic techniques of exposing false and eliciting truth” (see Merriam-Webster, 2a). Plato engaged in dialectic as described “the Platonic investigation of the eternal ideas (Ibid, 2b). What Plato meant by dialectic in the *Republic* is “the highest level of knowledge, a stage in which opposition or the contradiction has been overcome. The stage of knowledge which Plato calls dialectic is one on which each of the forms is known in its immutable truth, and all forms are known in their relationship to each other and to the Idea of the Good. “We place dialectic,” Plato says, “on top of our other studies like a coping-stone... not other study could rightly be put above this.” (See Plato’s *Republic* (534e), also, Chapter 7 out of 9. And Aristotle believed that the genuine understanding of a thing is best facilitated by or represented in a demonstrative argument. Many scholars believe that dialectic is to be Aristotle’s primary method, although he recommended the demonstrative method in his *Posterior Analytics*. See Robin Smith (1994) and D.W. Hamlyn (1990).



on Aristotle began his search for happiness by distinguishing what we humans want for the sake of happiness proper—the ends in themselves and what we want for the sake of something else—the means to other ends. Our aim, according to Aristotle, is to achieve happiness, or—*eudemonia* (in Aristotle’s *NE*, a book for achieving human happiness.). But happiness is difficult to achieve. Although not further exploring the opposite side of happiness, Aristotle persistently persuaded his contemporaries and the future generations that happiness is the good (*NE*, Book 1, p. 6), and the good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with the appropriate excellence (virtue) (p. 14).

As is the opposite of happiness, suffering or pain is regarded as something that “could never be the way of truth, and still less the way of” beauty (McMahon, 2006, p. 283). People want to avoid anything with the taint of pain or suffering. But, it is not even a reasonable goal that pain could be neither impatiently denied nor entirely abolished. Darrin McMahon in his book, *Happiness—A history* (2006), delineates that some may think that “[a] necessary concomitant of a fallen world, pain was a fact of existence to be accepted and borne—preferably with joy” (p. 282). Others may hold that pain was at once “unnecessary and contingent, an unadulterated evil” (p. 283) and should be outlawed, ought “*not* to be savoured or transformed” (p. 283). Still others may believe that “suffering is natural to the human condition” (p. 283). Pain and suffering, though undeniably bad and undesirable, are not something we can deny in order not to suffer.

On the contrary, I contend that they are, on one side of a dialectic view, “the primary motivators for seeking” (Mahoney, 2005, p. 347). On the other side of a dialectic, we can certainly not reject happiness in order to be happy, precisely because “happiness is a self-reinforcing state,” as Hegel (trans. 1979) warns us, and “rejecting happiness is

thus not a good way to get happy, at least not in conditions where happiness is obtainable” (p. 436). On this view, this work seeks to employ the dialectic insight into the dynamic of suffering associations and antitheses to conceptualize precisely the tragic conflicts and happy consciousness in relation to happiness and suffering (or pain), fortune and misfortune, and so on. Consider happiness and suffering, for example. To understand the meaning of happiness, we cannot avoid entering into a meta-ethical realm, which concerns the nature of ethics and its most basic concepts, such as “good” or “bad,” and “right” or “wrong.” In the dialectic treatment of suffering and happiness, we are also considering the ethical or moral judgments that can be about objective meaning and express subjective preferences.

Russell (1946/2005) understands and supports Aristotle when he says “The good, we are told, is *happiness*, which is an activity of the soul” (p. 168, original emphasis). In Aristotle, the good is reason in accordance with activity, a view that is both contemplative and practical. Our happy consciousness lies in the activity of the soul. This is essential to the account of virtue, as we recall that happiness in Socrates comes from being virtuous and self-disciplined. For Stoics, especially, for Epictetus, our happiness entirely depends on our own character, and how we flourish entirely up to us—the kind of life we want is up to us. This connects us to Aristotelian notion of ultimate ends of human beings, what differs in achieving an Aristotelian end of *eudemonia* (happiness) may rest upon our teleology. That is, for what we live to be happy, and, I would add, for what we suffer.

Thus, continuing happiness and pain with the moral terms “good” or “bad” can be understood only by reference to those subjective responses or preferences. That means

the moral attitude that is expressed by the declaration of being happy in the above stated case can only be fully understood if we also take into account the meta-ethical views of those who state it. Thus, the essence of happiness is revealed through its dialectic relation to suffering and their relationship both exists and arises from one another. We then embrace a wider variety of relations, a relation that goes beyond just that of good or bad, happy or painful, right or wrong. In the discussion of meta-ethical concepts, good, on Hegel's (2002) dialectic self-transcendence of things, is neither entirely good nor entirely evil, but something new, something of its fuller self or new determination (see *Science of Logic, SL*). As such, I ask, Could suffering and happiness be said, beyond their dualism, to be something of a new determination, too?

### ***Moral Freedom: Virtuous Being and Human Agency in Becoming***

This "new determination," I would say, consists in our moral responsibility and moral freedom, as I recall Hadot's (2007) expression about happiness, which "consists in independence, freedom, and autonomy" (p. 102). For Hadot, happiness, "the return to the essential," lies truly in "ourselves" (Ibid.). That is, happiness entirely depends on us. This is certainly true in Stoicism which distinguishes between what does and what does not depend on us, and in Confucianism and Aristotelianism which emphasize self-cultivation and the exercise of virtue, focusing on what one can and cannot do in the activities of the soul. Put in another way, the way to achieve moral freedom consists in human spiritual exercise. All spiritual exercises are, in Hadot's expression, fundamentally, a return to the true self:

[T]he self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The “self” liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought. (p. 103, original emphasis)

In the original and more profound sense, these exercises that honour the virtues can emerge in conscious cultivation and learning and will allow us to attain wisdom: practical wisdom of ourselves and of the world. The many forms of exercises cultivate many versions of potential, and together they entail a sort of will and power that can contain the pain for those who need their strength, and for those who can hold their own course through personal difficulties. Spiritual exercise, in both its moral and existential senses, implies an exercise of human agency, an ability to hold onto a sense of centre in a world where suffering and afflictions (chaos) seem to be everywhere and growing.

What is agency then? Simply, when talking about dance and understanding (my own experience—more discussion in the chapters to follow), for example, we are talking about our ability to dance and understand, that is, we are talking about physical ability and mental ability, or both. Human agency, as the source of action and ability to make choice, is entailed and cultivated in these activities of the soul with virtue. (Aristotle’s view of virtue is the activity of the soul.) Spiritual exercise, in this case, lifts up suffering (the phenomenon of death) as recognized, with the antithesis of the will of all human souls that progress in the consciousness of freedom. This freedom reaches the dialectical determination and fulfillment, that is, the “third thing” or the synthesis of the two

opposite or negated parts (thesis and antithesis): suffering and happiness. In this process we also reach self-affirmation and reformulation of our self-understanding, our ability, and our agency to allow for practical wisdom of context, circumstance, and connectedness. Aristotle's practical wisdom here is, we might say, ethical responsibility and moral freedom encompassed in a morality of existence and of human agency.

Moral agency, in the case of an individual's existential responsibility and freedom, is not, I believe, what is said to be the categorical imperative of moral agency as in a Kantian imperative principle of agency, in that individuals are made into agents. Nor is it merely what Christine Korsgaard (1996, 2008) posits in emphasizing the link between agency and the practical issue of why they should be rational and moral as she says, "...we occupy the standpoint of practical reason" (1996, p. 378). First, Kant's categorical imperative, representing the formula of the Universal Law, urges us only to act on a maxim. This we could will to be the law, and this *is* the law of a free will, as I recall in my reading of Kant: "*act only in accord with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*" (trans. 1996, p. 73). Thus, moral agency, in Kant's categorical imperative principle requires individuals' choices and actions to pass the categorical imperative test in order to become a universal law. This confines moral agency to a consistent ontological status: a person must act in a way that is guided by the universal law.

Rather than giving a precise definition of agency, Korsgaard (1996) defines agency as both active and passive, as both actors and subjects of experience (p. 363). And she continues to say that "we may regard ourselves as agents, as thinkers of our thoughts and the originators of our action" (p. 377). In her definition of active agents we are not,

by contrast to Kant's view, metaphysical selves, but only agents. We are agents only provided we are free and active selves, who are only "unmoved movers" (see Chisholm, 1964; McDonald, 2010). That is the passive side of agent. As Fritz McDonald (2010) criticizes, this position would "only be able to succeed at offering a foundation for morality at the cost of an account of agency that is too restrictive" (p. 199), because either hypothetical/categorical imperative principles of agency, by which individuals are made into moral agents (in Kant) or practicality of agency are less clearly individuals' responsibility. Martha Nussbaum (1990) goes as far as to emphasize being passive and vulnerable in moving our responsive and responsible agency. She urges us "to be willing to be passive and to be surprised by the new" (pp. 177, 209), because the "willingness to surrender invulnerability, to take up a posture of agency that is porous and susceptible of influence, is of the highest importance in getting an accurate perception of particular things in the world" (p. 180).

Moral agency in our case emphasizes individual's choice and freedom, consists in both self-responsibility and self-mastering in such particular circumstances as human affliction and suffering. The emphasis is placed on the self-exercise and cultivation of individual virtue endorsed by ancient Greek and classical Chinese philosophers aforementioned. On this view, moral agency, thus, is both "a particular kind of surrender" (Chinnery, 2003, p. 14) and an ability arising from such surrender. We surrender, because we are both free from the context and responsible for our choice; we are able to be free and responsible to choose and act, because our morality is exercised in achieving our moral freedom, which is transformative and integrative. This moral freedom, to sum up, is an existential and responsible freedom, because we are dealing with reality "here and

now,” (as recommended by Confucius) and not to dwell on religious or illusory troubles. And things we are experiencing make sense to us, as Michael Mahoney (2005) says, “We want and need things to ‘make sense’” (p. 340). And suffering presses us and drives us to make sense here and now because we have to make sense of our existential conditions, and such things as suffering and death become not so difficult to accept. And we do not rely on others to help us make sense of apparently senseless acts. We can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we are always “more” than ourselves. How then are we more than ourselves? And how can we make sense of our experience of suffering?

### **Stories of Suffering and the Moral Self**

Amato (1990) assumes that “we know ourselves, in feeling and thought, aspirations and contradictions, by knowing our history” (p. xxiv). I read him as claiming that history, being self-evident, sheds light on life experience, because the past helps a child understand who she is. In the time of our ups and downs, progresses and changes, we define ourselves in our history, where we come from and where we are and ought to be going. We cannot turn our back on the past. In understanding Amato’s emphasis that history matters to us, I would add that our life stories—especially, those of suffering—are our most specific and legitimate aspirations to know ourselves, which, in turn, help us with shaping the content and process of understanding and writing about our history.

We find more supporting voices in legitimizing stories of suffering in Arthur Frank (1995), Nancy Miller (1992), and Carol Picard (2000, 1991). Kathy Charmaz

(1995, 1999), in her analysis of subjective tales and research narratives, has discussed relationships between suffering and the self, between gender and moral status; and the relationship to meanings of suffering stories and to the construction of the self. While “suffering is a profoundly moral status” (Charmaz, 1995, p. xx), stories of suffering are moral stories of a person herself and her life. For, as David Carr (2005) says, “Suffering involves the person’s moral self and ethical understandings” (p. 143). Yet these particular kinds of moral stories are not simply those read in our childhood, when the soul is pure and clear, and remembered for the rest of the lives, in the hope of improving children’s moral values and learning about the human life. Rather, stories of suffering, as our life stories, arrest our subjective inclinations and attitudes toward our objective interest (e.g., reality, others, etc.) in understanding our moral selves in relation to a larger social spectrum. And it is in virtue of these attitudes that our moral selves exist and develop. In concert with this view, Peter Roberts (2008) notes that the social and personal status of life is full of examples of difficult decisions, “decisions seemingly against one’s self-interests, being made after much agonizing and inner life” (p. 535). Using aged people’s stories of suffering as illustration, Robert Rubinstein and Helen Black (2004) have explored “the personal meaning of suffering.”

The aspect of the moral self, fundamental to moral psychology (e.g., James, 1983; Dewey, 1917; Bergman, 2005; Brinkmann, 2004), has provided an illuminating lens for philosophy of education and moral education. Most philosophers suggest that only rational beings, people who can reason and form self-interested judgments, are capable of being moral agents, who are persons, in Charles Taylor’s assertion, whose personhood consists in its relation to moral goods and commitments (in Sugarman, 2005). According



to this view, persons not only have an understanding of themselves as moral agents, but also are partially constituted by this understanding. According to Jeff Sugarman (2005) persons as moral agents may be capable of effecting changes in their lives through enacting understandings of the good and “have the capacity not only to adopt and wield social and cultural moral practices, but also to revise and transform them” (p. 793).

Storytelling of suffering is thus embedded in this revising and transforming in clarifying the relation between persons and moral agency (Carr, 2001; Sugarman, 2005) between the individual ethical responsibility and social moral practice. A person’s moral change and transformation in this reflective, hermeneutical, and interpretive process, fashions more virtuous persons whom may be reflected in a classical fashioning of one’s self as in Stoicism, Confucianism and Daoism. This process, personal and social, shows that the narrated selves are the living stories of the individual and the collective (Peacock, & Holland, 1993). This process is characteristic of the hermeneutical interpretive phenomenology, which “is an approach to thinking about what it means to be human,” and “illuminates appropriate ways of getting at how humans understand themselves” (Johnston, 2007, p. 103).

Discovering moral agency in experiences of suffering (a core theme of this work will be delineated in what follows), I want to point out, connects and expands the metaphysical and epistemological meaning of suffering and human existence. (These themes will be exemplified in the narratives throughout the remaining chapters.) These ideas are expressed in the writings of existentialism and phenomenology by philosophers like Kierkegaard (1849/1989), Heidegger (1953/1996), and Marcel (1960, 1963, 1967), and in more recent writings (e.g., White, 1981; Young, 1987; Bruner, 1987; Madison,

1988, 1994; Denzin, 1989; Klugman, 2007; Johnston, 2007). Their accounts expanded epistemological concerns about what it means to “know” to concerns of ontology, that is, how to come to be” (Johnston, p.103). While Kierkegaard regarded human existence as in the modes of becoming—possibility, Marcel (1960, 1963) saw our being embodied in the choosing to participate, or, in other words, see our “participation as a mode of being” (Johnston, 2007, p. 104). Similarly, Heidegger (1953/1996) understood that hermeneutics is an interpretation of *Dasein*’s being (or “being there”)—a human capacity to comprehend one’s own existence, which, for Heidegger, is openness, as it is possibility for Kierkegaard.

It is clear that the story of suffering as a human condition has invited deep philosophical reflection, and is hence worthy of continuing educational engagement. Similar to the real life storytelling of suffering that is of educational relevance, literary works, of suffering or otherwise, Roberts (2008) suggests, can also be helpful, in demonstrating how teaching and learning occur throughout our lives. Engagement with stories of horror and suffering in school settings calls for attention to ethical listening, which, in turn, brings to such occasions, as Sharon Todd (2002) describes, the possibility of hearing not only the horror, but of opening ourselves up to traces of the other and (I would add) to vicarious experiences of the self. In other words, the double-edge of telling suffering stories makes it possible that “those who listen will be affected by their own suffering in turn” (Todd, 2002, p. 411). In considering moral regard of telling and listening to stories of suffering, Todd holds that “education is fundamentally a violent process in its demand that students be moved to the point of such suffering” (p. 411). Warning against the risk of falling into “paralysis or despair” (p. 412), she tells us that

“teachers need to attend to their own attending to these educational practices whereby while suffering being invited, more ethical and just responses to suffering are to be sought” (p. 412). This concern, revealed in Stillwaggon’s work, Avis, and Jonas’s, joining Todd, seems to suggest that we can limit suffering in classroom practices, as in Todd’s words, “our work must always be seen as dwelling within the spaces of liminality” (p. 412). But their other concern is that in doing so we might create weakness, which will produce more suffering down the line. It should be noted that all efforts made here suggest that the real objective of moral action in the storytelling of suffering is the avoidance of suffering. Having reviewed suffering and its ethical matters, I shall now move to some contemporary views on suffering and its involvement in education.

### **True Existence: Being and Becoming.**

#### ***Monologue 1: The Way of Affirmation***

My life seemed only to begin the day when my family was turned upside-down by the unprecedented Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China (1966-1976).<sup>31</sup>

One early morning, four men burst into our home. A man of middle years in an olive green uniform (绿军装) bellowed at my father. I, a six year old, hid myself behind my mother’s back, tugging at her sleeves, numb with fright. Indiscriminately, the men tied up my father with an oversized rough rope and dragged him out of the door. It happened so suddenly that none of them was

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<sup>31</sup> This and the subsequent stories are the autobiographical accounts of my early life during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Some of them are revised accounts of stories that appeared previously in my MA thesis.

able to utter a sound.

My father was university professor, one of so-called *Chouliaojiu* (the “Old Stinking Nines”)<sup>32</sup> during the Revolution. That day he was taken to an Open air meeting of “Ten Thousand People Criticism and Denunciation.” From a distance, I gazed, at my father’s hunched back and his bent head, with a large board hanging over his chest. Squeezing in sideways near the front, I saw my father kneeling on ground covered with coal cinders and broken glass. His arms were pinned behind his back. His face was waxen and his head forcibly pushed down. A huge wooden board was slung over his neck, on which “Traitor Huang Yongfeng” was written in black characters, bearing a red cross over the centre of his name (叛徒 ~~黄永丰~~).

A bushy-browed man pushed my father so hard that his knees dug deep into the ground. Upon this, people in the crowd surged and pushed forward. With one of my elder brothers I pushed through too, near enough to see that both of my father’s knees were bleeding. Another man stood beside my father, frantically wielding a sheet of paper and shouting at the top of his lungs, “Huang Yongfeng, traitor! Special agent of Kuomintang! The crowd roared a deafening slogan: “Leniency to those who confess their crimes and severity to those who refuse to!” Frightened and in pain, I managed to smother my sobs. But I wished

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<sup>32</sup> *Chouliaojiu* (the Old Stinking Nines). The term *Chouliaojiu* actually originated from the 1957 mammoth Anti-Rightist Movement, which was aimed at the intellectuals, and was used to name them in the Cultural Revolution because the targets of the revolution were the following nine groups of people: landlords (地主), rich-peasants (富农), counterrevolutionaries (反革命分子), bad elements (坏分子), the rightists (右派分子), traitors (叛徒), special agents (特务), and capitalist-road-takers (走资派). The ninth target was intellectuals, the so-called *reactionary academic authorities* who were often termed the “Old Stinking Nines.”

that my father would say “Yes, I am, but I am sorry.” Like the previous *shushu* (uncle), he would then, I thought, no longer be kneeling on the broken glass. Yet my father never said yes...

The evening finally came. My father limped home, drained and pale, and bruised all over. I saw a weak smile on his face. My mother (a gynaecologist and obstetrician of a local hospital) laid him in bed, washed the blood from his knees, and bandaged the wounds. None of them cried. They said little. Mother cooked father’s favorite food, deep fried some peanuts, and warmed a small cup of Chinese liquor. Late into night, I heard mother tell about a Chinese folk remedy that a little child’s urine was an effective remedy for bruises and injury of sinews and bones. It would help stimulate the circulation of blood causing muscles and joints to relax. Mother meant only to comfort them. My heart ached when I saw my father’s sunken eyes and waxen face under the dim yellow light of the room. I went alone to the corner behind the door and urinated in a cup. With the cup in my hands, I walked towards my mother...

“We do well to begin with affirmation” says Willy Dudley (2002, p. 197).

Affirming the truth of life, whether reasonable or absurd, endurable or otherwise, is a way to accommodate us towards each of our *becoming*, with the overcoming of the very *being*. Though stunned and frightened by the circumstances that befell my family, I learned to affirm the real, the real that I was forced to face and yet not allowed to escape from. Only six years old, I reconciled, in my own way, with my reality. I wished that my father would have confessed that he was a traitor, for the sake of freeing the pain. Seeing my father’s

“sunken eyes,” “waxen face,” and “bruised” body, I went quietly to urinate in a cup, in the hope of helping my aching father. My way of reconciliation with the unavoidable existence embraced not only a particular form of *being* with myself and the external reality but also a form of *becoming*. It is in this embracing of *becoming*, described by Dudley (2002), as “the activity of the tragic” (p. 230) that endowed me with a form of freedom in my affirmation of and conciliation with reality that day.

### ***Monologue 2: The Way of Responsibility***

Still in the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, it happened one morning at school that as I just pushed the door ajar, I was struck on the top of my head by a bamboo dust-pan which was mischievously placed on the top of the classroom door. Dust poured down, turning me “gray.” Without daring to raise my eyes, I entered the room, face blazing red out of shame. The night before, both my father and mother were most humiliatingly denounced at the “Criticism Meeting” in the First People’s Hospital of Neijiang District where my mother worked.

Among the clamors and sneers, I heard someone yelling: “Huang Yongfeng, Traitor! Chen Xueyuan, Traitor’s *Laopo* (wife)! Hearing those names, my heart felt as if poked by a needle. The class bell finally rang. I seemed relieved. The moment I raised my eyes, I caught sight of some oversized chalk words on the blackboard: “Down with Chen Hong’s father, Traitor Huang Yongfeng! Down with Chen Hong’s mother, Rich Peasant’s

Daughter Chen Xueyuan!” I lowered my head instantly, feeling as if I was being stripped of clothes and stigmatized by those names on the board.

Class was still in commotion. I felt a sense of responsibility and, gathering my strength, I walked toward the blackboard. I stepped onto the platform, picked up the chalk brush and wiped off the chalk slogans. But then I found it difficult to turn back. The class fell silent. When I finally turned and stepped down to walk to my seat, the teacher stepped on the platform. The class was unusually quiet that morning.

These experiences both identified and affiliated me with the outer world. My imposed *being* underwent a shaping that made me understand and accept my *becoming* in the larger world, thus I conceived of my behaviours in a new light. My existence was thus also altered.

Mary Lefkowitz (1981) says that “tragedy concerns the acquisition of knowledge through suffering” (p. 4). It seems true that our lived experiences as moral narratives are often about worthy suffering, which tell suffering that defines human meaning by affirming and meriting actual *being* and *becoming*. This kind of *becoming* is not just through its tragedies but also through its aspirations to life.

### ***Monologue 3: The Way of Intensity***

“Pain, in a word, was transformative” and opens up the possibility of empathy and compassion (McMahon, p. 283). Pain, and more of the kind (e.g., humiliation, misery, sorrow) may provide fertile soil in which happiness grows. Far more than pleasure, pain

exposes us to the intensity of human experience, carving out room for the exhilaration of feeling. Pain instills in us an appreciation for the common lot of humanity, which is a “place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways.”<sup>33</sup>

In school, I was particularly afraid of recess and dismissal times. I was terrified to be among the crowd or to pass through it to go home. I was terrified at what the girls and boys would do when they were having fun. The day finally came...

I walked out of the classroom when school was over in the afternoon. Some boys chased after me, shouting “Chen Hong! Traitor Huang Yongfeng’s daughter! Someone had written my name on my back! One boy jabbed my back, and another swiftly ran over to push him against me and almost knocked me down. The shouting was followed by exultant laughter. Mud and dirt were flung onto me...I fixed my eyes on my feet. I burst into tears...this shattered the last bit of human dignity and bravery of a seven year-old girl.

I ran into the corner of the classroom building and pressed myself hard against it as if to become one with the wall. I wished I could disappear, my father’s name, the ear-thrilling shouting, everything! I wished it were dark, pitch dark, so nobody could see me, the name on my back, my eyes, my messed-up hair, my muddy shirt. I wanted to disappear. Suddenly, a gentle voice invaded my thoughts. It was a woman’s voice: “Xiao [Little] Chen Hong, go home now. You tell your mother and you will feel better.” The voice, calm and gentle, was

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<sup>33</sup> See Keats, John (1819) to George and Georgiana Keats, April 21, 1819, in *Letters*, 2:102.



almost a whisper.

Sobbing even more, “No, I can’t tell mother,” said I, still facing the corner. “Mother has high blood pressure.” But I listened to the gentle voice and headed home in a stupor. I wiped the tears off my face and put on a smile when stepping into our two-room flat. At supper that evening, I looked at my mother’s face and felt light-hearted. I was happy, a happiness that I hadn’t felt for so long...

The inevitability of being pained and humiliated raised in me, a seven-year old girl, a humble heart and reminded me of the need to act with compassion towards others. I couldn’t burden my mother with my pain, and to bear it all alone made me “light-hearted” and “happy.” It is in this place where my heart felt and suffered that I found my way to assert my own earnest and profound feeling of happiness.

#### ***Monologue 4: The Way of Darkness***

The way of darkness arises from the way of brightness and vice versa, just as the way of my little self’s happy feeling arises from the way of my painful encounter at school. Each dwells in and gives rise to the other, and each would be incomplete and less productive without the other.

It transpired in the summer. My father was once again imprisoned. After the ten-year Cultural Revolution, intellectuals in the country gradually resumed their original positions. This struck great fear among local people and greater desperation in our family. My mother was taken away for “quarantine

interrogation,” and my elder brother was sent to the countryside as a re-educated youth. I was in high school. “Will Teacher Huang’s family survive this time?” people feared.

The situation was stiflingly dire for us. My father was unable to send letters of appeal, something he had never ceased to do during the past ten years. I felt I had to do something. I decided to plead on my father’s behalf. I wrote a letter in the first-person, the voice of a daughter about her father, addressed directly to *Renmin Ribao* (the People’s Daily), the newspaper of the Central Party Committee of China. Miraculously, we were given a reply! The letter was not published, but an order of inquiry and investigation was issued from the Central Party Committee to the Provincial Party Committee and passed over to the District Public Security Bureau.

My father was released immediately from prison. My mother heard people say that it was Teacher Huang’s daughter who wrote a letter that touched the superiors. Father, mother, and brother were so happy and I cried for joy! This was the moment I recognized how important it was to know what you wanted to do and how joyful you could be when you did it!

My family and I entered the darkness of sense—the way of desperation as a purgative and release of negative being. I then perceived my reflexive will that both subordinates and overcomes the desperation, as I felt that “I had to do something”—the way of a new determination as becoming open to receive the liberating strength that arose from the darkness.

Experience of this kind bore fruit in my life: “I cried for joy!” Tears of her joy arose from the tears of my desperation.

### **Chapter 3. Dancing Beyond Existence: Artistic Virtues, Moral Agency, and Education**

#### **Introduction: When Schooling Was Dismantled...**

*Sudden and all!*

*Desolated onto a sweeping outpost*

*We still listened, to the sound of reading words,*

*But, how dim. How tantalizing...*

*From there, the paled roses, barren of the green*

*Begged for myriad tinges, if not bright hues;*

*Upon here, the parched terrain reached out*

*For raining flakes of torn pages and broken letters.*

*We lingered, then, in our erudite poverty, and, often*

*Bumped against others' innocent yearnings;*

*Then, we were coursed by our own,*

*Dancing feet, maddeningly, onto the ignorant weeds.*

The educational significance of artistic activities has long been studied. David Carr's writings focus on aesthetics and aesthetic education, with a special interest, among other topics, in the meaning of dance and its moral values in relation to ethics and moral education. Carr addresses the nature of art (literature, music, painting, dance, etc.), specifically from the standpoint of philosophy of art and its importance in education. In a discussion of dance from the viewpoint of philosophy of education, Carr (1984) argues, "Of all the forms of human endeavour that may be found presented in an educational curriculum, the place and status of dance is perhaps the most ambiguous" (p. 67). Carr

thus insists that dance as an art form requires an educational approach similar to other forms of art, rather than being simply “taught as a branch of physical activity by teachers of physical education” (p. 67). In linking the sociological or anthropological aspects to a more philosophical aesthetics or semantic theory, he emphasizes dance as having “*intrinsic* educational value” (1997, p. 365). This topic inspires me to take a lead from my own personal experiences in dance in an unconventional educational milieu wherein schooling was deliberately “dismantled.”

Responding to this call for the educational value of dance (as urged by Carr, 1984, 1997; Best, 1985, 1992; McFee, 1992, 1994), I ponder what intrinsic relationship art may have with education as represented in the curricula of educational institutions, and, in particular, when formal schooling is not in place. And how does this inherent connection between dance and education influence the formation of one’s aesthetic virtues and moral agency? This brings to mind an unforgettable scene a long while ago when dance became a mode necessary for survival. What more, then, could this specific artistic form, apart from providing me with necessary skill or social status, render in the name of art, or artistic activities? What did it matter in that situation to a person’s educational growth?

So, I am compelled to connect these questions to what matters in the art of dance during the ten-year (1966-1976) Chinese Cultural Revolution when formal schooling was irregular. This connection, then, has been interspersed by my constant anxiety and serenity in radical sympathy: a mixed and distinct awareness. The dance I chose to do was not only politically necessary for my ability to live a life and to fit into the social order under an oppressive regime, but also valuable as a means of forming a conscientious personhood. I danced in order to survive, consciously or otherwise. But the

more recent motto, “Dancing for your life!” on the American and Canadian dance contests that, to some extent, parallels the spirit of dancing to live a life, urges me to pursue the worth of that single “dancing” platform when traditional schooling was politically disfigured.

Under China’s unprecedented Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, the entire nation was deprived of education, books were banned, schools destroyed, and teachers—my father among the so-called “Old Stinking Nines (Intellectuals)” —were thrown onto work farms to be “reformed.” There came, first, an order to suspend school nationwide in order that students and teachers could join the revolutionary campaign, and, later, an “Announcement with Regard to Resuming Classes and Waging Revolution of Universities, Middle and Primary Schools.” From then until the end of the ten-year Revolution, higher education was entirely shut down to admissions, while elementary and secondary schooling, though active, were often suspended, or, otherwise regularly interrupted.<sup>34</sup> While longing for the open day of a new term after a long “anarchical” summer or winter vacation, we little schoolers went to school only to read the “School Suspension Notice” posted upon the wall of the teachers’ office building. This could mean one month or two months, at best, or the whole term (six months), at worst.

Even during the active school days, we could, rightly, or I should say, officially, commit ourselves to “revolutionary extracurricular activities,” such as dancing, singing, telling “revolutionary stories,” and other revolutionary propaganda activities. Most of my

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<sup>34</sup> Higher education was restored only after its 10 year’s suspension during the Cultural Revolution. The first entrance examination was held in December 1977 (physical examination was on January 18), and 270,000 out of 5,700, 000 examinees (aged 13-37, eligible for the examination) were admitted. I was one of these as the first batch of perspective students, entering school in March of 1978.

five year elementary school days were spent rehearsing and performing the “Eight Modern Revolutionary Model Operas”<sup>35</sup> advocated by Chairman Mao’s wife, *Jiang Qing*, a movement that pervaded throughout China, while the slogan “Learn, Sing, and Perform Modern Revolutionary Model Operas!” rang out and resounded everywhere in the country. Implicitly, this became the heart of our curricular tasks.

What then could art do for pre-school children and post-school youths in the anarchical period when parents and teachers were constantly mobilized in the heated “left-and-right” campaigns and knowledge was “proudly” undervalued? (There was slogan that read: Reading no books, no newspapers, learning no ABC (i.e., English alphabet), and we can still wage revolution!) As German poet-thinker Friedrich Schiller observed in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (2004/1795), people cannot transcend their circumstances without education, and art, as he conceived it, is the vehicle of education. How, then, could we young people transcend our particular circumstances when our education was unquestionably problematic under the political condition of China? Did art in this case prove Schiller’s assertion of art as the vehicle of education? Instead of attempting to answer these questions, I will, in what follows, take a retrospective view to investigate the educational significance of artistic activities through considering aesthetic virtues and moral agency.

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<sup>35</sup> “Eight Modern Revolutionary Model Operas”: including 6 revolutionary modern Peking Operas 《红灯记》, 《沙家浜》, 《智取威虎山》, 《龙江颂》, 《海港》, 《奇袭白虎团》; and 2 modern revolutionary ballet operas 《白毛女》, 《红色娘子军》.

## Epistemic Virtue: Dancing to Know and Justify

*In the praise of the utmost  
Is the very matter of dancing;  
We effaced our low appearance,  
In organic grace and beauty.  
So that we originated the selves  
In the vindication of our forced ones.  
To shine our physical exigency in dance  
Our merits were erected to acclaim.*

It seemed to us that singing and dancing “Mao Zedong Thoughts,” through these revolutionary model operas went far beyond the simple experience of political agenda and artistry. Participation in these highly praised activities changed our lives utterly, in turn, from our already drastically altered ones upon the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Consider my radically “altered” family. My father and mother were taken away to the countless public denunciations, to work farms to be reformed, to “study classes” for self criticism, to cowshed and prison for a graded treatment of severity; while we three siblings—on-and-off schoolers—were under the “leadership” of our eldest brother, 11-year-old Shudu, occasionally supervised by our old nanny *Lei Popo* (Grandma Lei).

There was a belief that the future life of us “whelps” of the social pariahs (my father was persecuted as reactionary academic authority, traitor, and special agent) was hopeless: obviously no college, no jobs, possibly no legitimate city-residence, unless—in yet a tantalizing hope—we had obtained special talents and skills such as singing, dancing, playing music instruments or sports. So my parents started us very young in ballet (for me)



and in violin and sports (for my second eldest brother Ming). Besides the reason that urged us to be under discipline, another devastating one was that my eldest brother Shudu was killed in the electrified water, while swimming in our local *Tuojiang River*. The incident, which I described in more detail in the Prologue above, happened on a normal summer day, one of the many oft-dismissed school days, when four six-graders (of the same class) were “electrocuted” in river water at one and the same time!

Indeed, engagement in these artistic activities “overturned” our abject lives, although under the banner of “Propagandising Mao Zedong Thoughts.” People, young and old, joined in the campaign, singing operas, reciting lyrics, acting the leading heroes, watching and doing the same artistic activities. Especially, we “school” youngsters, as it were, learned, sang, and acted. We chosen ones were sent to be trained by professional ballet troupes, rehearsed endlessly, day and night, performed virtually in every possible place: at school, in the streets, on theatre stages, in factory workshops, on military drilling bases, and in crop fields, That was the idea! That was the primary thing that we knew we were to learn and to do, both in school and out of school.

### ***Epistemic Virtues***

Virtue, as we understand it from Aristotle, is a trait of character, rendering its possessor good, morally and intellectually. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), which mostly concerns individual moral virtues and how to attain them, Aristotle (version 2009) says, “Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching” (p. 23), which therefore requires experience and time, while “moral virtue comes about as a result of habit,” which we are adapted by nature to receive, and “are made perfect by habit” (p.

23). This means that nature gives us the capacity to acquire them, but they are brought forth by habit. And the virtues we get by first exercising them, as happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. Moral virtue, “like arts, is acquired by repetition of the corresponding acts” (p. 23).

For Aristotle, art is “a reasoned state of capacity” and involves “true reasoning” (p. 105)—knowledge of how to make things. We may say that this sort of knowledge is one form of practical wisdom, as Aristotle confirms in Book VI of *NE* that “all the virtues are the forms of practical wisdom,” or at least, “they implied practical wisdom” (p. 116). Art, as a capacity to make things, implies both intellectual and moral virtues. Practical knowledge leads to “intellectual virtue,” (p. 21) and it is also a dependent part of moral virtues. Aristotle maintains that “the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) both completes and presupposes moral virtue” (Carr & Steutel, 1999, p. 11). Through repetitive dancing and singing in the operas and ballet dramas, we acquired knowledge of *how* to dance and sing—epistemic virtue. We could say that we acquired artistic “conceptual knowledge combined with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of ideas that literally transform one’s experiences and perceptions” (Girod, Rau & Schepige, 2003, p. 578).

### ***To Know and Justify***

In our situation, our key personal perseverance helped us to understand ourselves, to justify our existence, and to continue the way over the years. We practically and habitually acquired this quality through training, practicing, and performing of dance, which gradually led us into an aesthetic way of knowing and formed in us a recognizable

personal disposition—a sort of virtue, I would say. We then would, over time, associate the corresponding exercise of this disposition or virtue with an ethical way of thinking and knowing, because such a way had given us an epistemic motivation to come to terms with what was true and real in our existence through our own embodied perceptual intensity of dance. With this sort of virtue, we were also led to avoid perilous errors (as what my parents had hoped after Shudu’s death).

On the occasions where life was at stake, especially for the blacklisted families, like my own, dancing for me, as for others, was a particular activity that could help us foster our personal qualities such as tenacity, perseverance, humility, hope and the like. These were obtained by committed and epistemic practice, through “experience and time” and, over those years, “brought forth by habit,” which internalized an epistemological determination through action and doing. Embedded in the aesthetic form of habituation, dance functioned as a nexus of the public and private space in us, in which the dancing subject was supposed to know who she was. Through aesthetic experience, Schiller asserts, people can reconcile the inner antagonism between sense and intellect, nature and reason. Enabled to follow on epistemic grounds, the movements of our self-knowing from hidden aspirations to open admission to fear for our life then raged at rejection; we then justified our way of being, in a grander sense, our existence. This epistemic nexus is crucial to our capacity for heroic determination to carry on a meaningful living. This character trait, of any I possessed, made me advance in assuming the principal role, *Xi'er* (喜儿), in the ballet dance drama “The White-Haired Girl” (白毛女).

This practical and epistemic actualization led me to discover the truth of life in which I was living and the place in which I interacted with others, and to avoid wrong deeds

that might challenge the social order designated for a child, like me, who came from the “Black (meaning “Bad”) Categories.” Dancing and singing, which had become another means for me to express my thoughts and interact with the outer world, necessitated both individuality and collectiveness, which, in turn, granted me a capacity not only to know in the artistic areas but also to know how to do the right thing over time. I had come to know what should be the right thing to do, aesthetically and intellectually, rightly and practically. The intrinsic relationship between the arts and arts-cultivated epistemology, indicated what I should be (moral virtues) and how I should act (practical knowledge) in accordance with the mean, relative to me. (Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean represents all virtues as gaining a balance between two extremes.) This knowing allowed me to justify my condition and the deeds I was performing. Dancing, which made me feel accepted in the group, seemed to justify what I did for my own sake and for the sake of the demand of the social order under those particular conditions.

### **Moral Agency: Dancing to Overcome the Self**

*The open espousal of elegiac voices and moves  
Catalyzed our conflicting impulses  
And committed us more to the nature of our being;  
The onrushing outlets of dancing  
Braved us to walk a path with a chisel  
To pry open the gate, yet we turned firmly inward.  
We knew: if the deathless earth had forgotten us,  
We could still dance to fold the dazzling “red” sky.*

Dancing and singing in the “Red Sea of Mao Zedong Thoughts,” besides meeting our need for survival, had become a special mode of living—another means and a better means for us to be ourselves, expressing thoughts and interacting with the outer world—which supported both our individual and collective sensibilities. Our artistic engagement, despite being summoned up by a historical political condition, gave us aesthetic and disciplined forms (or a capacity or disposition aforementioned, and to which I will return later), especially that of the kind shaped through physical, emotional, and habitual practice in dancing and singing. Those who could dance and sing—participating in any of these forms, no matter how well they did according to the “professional” standard—were reported to do better in their school work. Their artistic attributes culminated in their recognized achievements in schools. More often than not, they had more chance of being awarded the highest praise (popularly designated for us school students), entitled “*San Hao Xuesheng*,” (“three merits students”), or called “all-rounded students” with three well-developed merits: “*De, Zhi, Ti*” (“德,智,体”)—“moral,” “intellectual,” “physical.” And this was the highest goal that I, like many other students, was striving to achieve.

In those days, *De* (or moral, virtuous) was the foremost merit a student should aim at. *Ti* (physical) encompassing artistic and sports activities readily implicated the embodied *De* (virtue). In other words, virtuous merit and physical merit were reciprocal and their manifestations mutual in this context. The standard for assessing a student in this honour, though not merely confined to singing, dancing or other artistic and sports experiences, was certainly privileged by his or her art and sport knowledge and skills—epistemic virtues. My brother and I won such “grand honour” several times, despite many opposing voices against our “black” (politically bad) family background. Such activities

equipped us with disciplined habits by which we were able to receive more than what we actually possessed (e.g., our innate talents) or what we were accordingly to obtain (e.g., skilled talents), and without which we seemed, at those times, to possess nothing.

### ***Moral Agency***

In the preceding section, I have looked at the epistemic virtues acquired in practicing dance grounded in Aristotelian ethical thinking. My point is that the acquisition of such artistic virtues is constitutive of the integration of moral and intellectual virtues, as the former comes about as a result of habit, repetitive practice and the latter from teaching, time and experience. This would be to say that it is characteristic of “*De*” (moral) and “*Zhi*” (intellectual, or epistemic), as touched upon above. Similar to epistemic virtues, moral agency (a notion I brought into discussion of dance and art) is not merely a moral virtue, distinctive from intellectual one. Agency, as it were, is the source or power from which actions are derived. Simply put, it elicits action. For the purpose of discussion, such agency, as acquired from dancing, formed in us a disposition to yield certain outcome, that is, we became skilled in ballet techniques or in deft singing and acting persona. The power of our acting and the power of dance as a manifestation of aesthetic power to represent our talents enabled us to tackle our dire situations. Moral agency—correlative of action, following Aristotle, arises from both intellectual virtue and moral virtue, through teaching, learning, and practicing. Through such experiences over time, we allegedly became “ballerinas” and “opera singers” by dancing and singing (just as in Aristotle’s example: the builder is to be called a builder only when he actually builds).

This sort of power is not intrinsic, but built into our being and doing, which in turn

is the source and origin of our acts. In Chinese culture, possession of moral strength is a merit or virtue, akin to wisdom or strength. Both art and practical wisdom, (which, for Aristotle, deal with things that are variable) are constitutive of our individual strength through collectiveness (by which I mean here a group whose commonality in these artistic activities was the commitment to engage in actual doing and repetitive practicing, apart from serving a political end). While serving as a means of living, dancing braced us through difficult times, allowing us to manifest a capacity to confront unpredictable challenges (e.g., the death of my brother, father's sudden disappearance, mother being taken away, and constant humiliation of my young self...). Then, what would, yet could, we do? We just danced. We continued dancing, which in turn bestowed in us moral agency, and the capacity to transcend our circumstances.

### ***Overcoming the Self***

Over the years, intensive dancing and performing of *The White Haired Girl* and *Red Women Soldiers* (two ballet operas propagandizing “Chairman Mao’s Revolutionary Artistic Line”) made me into a popular little “ballerina” (though still unacceptable for being a professional one, in which sense, being a professional meant a secure and desirable job—one unquestionably *not* for a daughter of a “blacklisted” background).

Ten years of countless meetings, big or small, criticizing or condemning, had become the routine of our life. One time (after the end of the Revolution), my mother and brother Ming were forced to be present for all three days of my father’s denunciation, though I was allowed to be absent in order to rehearse for the evening performance of Mao Zedong’s Propaganda thoughts in Sichuan Opera Theatre. The performance was to

be on the same stage where the criticism was being held in the day. I had experienced numerous criticisms and meetings that condemned my father, but I had never been “forced” to dance on the spot where my father had been persecuted, humiliated, beaten, savagely bound by ropes, and dragged away only hours before.

Having grown accustomed to this pattern of our family, people accepted the irony of the occasion: that the girl would dance Mao Zedong’s Propaganda Thoughts opera on the stage where her father had spoken against the authorities only moments before. The family, including myself, accepted this paradox as a necessary part of survival in these troubled times. That night, however, I felt that the audience had an uneasy and piteous feeling toward me, a sixteen-year-old girl caught in the political conflict that had engulfed China. Perhaps they wondered how I could still smile and remain captivating for the audience! How could I dance as if nothing had happened? That night, on the stage where I had performed countless times, my strength surged with me through a flood of onrushing rage. Later on, when asked how I was still able to smile while dancing that night, I recall telling people that my eyes were full of blood. Finally, I bought myself into the culture of my oppressors through singing and dancing, which earned me agency to appropriate that context for a self-renewal and even self-creation. I became concerned with finding opportunities through acceptance and liberation, rather than through victimization and oppression. This became a source of moral potency for our being and existence then.



## Aesthetic Contemplation: Dancing to Hope

*We danced to aim  
In the contemplation of a grandiose anchor;  
We beamed into an embodied vision,  
Our fondue<sup>36</sup> desires grew, exchanging  
Living fetters for a freeing gait of hope;  
We yearned for connection—.   
Everything for it, we dreamed!  
Our esteem and sense of being in the world.*

We danced, certainly, to achieve an end, either to survive an ordeal, or to enjoy an aesthetic manifestation. We were often acclaimed for our presentable images, despite their transient presence both on and off our performing “stages,” whereby we were still confronting that politically real existence. Our creative conduct in dance and other artistic pursuits could be understood not only as the achievement of political objectives but also as the contemplations and outcomes conditioned by discipline and practice in the vision of the beautiful. This is further illuminated by what Carr has argued for on a number of occasions (see, Carr 1984, 1987, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006) about learning, skills, and knowledge in relation to aesthetic experiences. He says,

[N]either the notion of a human skill nor that of the practical  
knowledge that is presupposed to the mastering of a human skill

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<sup>36</sup> *Fundue* (spelt also “*fundue*,” a dish mixed with cheese and chocolate) is a ballet movement meaning “melted” (lowering the body by bending on one leg). It is a fluid and graceful movement we often practiced at the barre and in choreographed in ballet dance. The French word is used here figuratively.

can be understood independently of reference to human purposes and aims and the rules of practical thought that are formulated in the interests of the precise fulfillment of these purposes and aims.  
(1984, p. 74)

And our specific purposes embedded in those artistic activities and skills came about through our aesthetic contemplation and hope.

### ***Contemplating the Beautiful***

Beauty or the way of contouring the image of beauty was different, if not distorted, in the times of socio-political instability in China. Or else, it connoted a specific sense in that the vision of beauty encompassing the colour red became the compelling image that weighed heavily in our vision of beauty. During my teenage years, I avoided appealing colours or clothes, or any allegedly “petty bourgeois” ways of life. But, as a matter of fact, we didn’t have many choices due to the generally meagre living provisions of China then and my father’s frozen bank account (one of the many restraints and punishments for a “black” element of society—and we had grandparents to support as well out of my mother’s 32 *yuan* monthly salary, as a gynaecologist and obstetrician!). Of course, beauty may not have anything to do with wealth or poverty, and it should also be independent from political imposition. But beauty, besides all possible connotations for the notion, is what is considered to be true and good. The often cited phrase from John Keats’s poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” has something to reveal between the true and the beautiful. Ludwig Wittgenstein, among many who have argued for links

between aesthetics and ethics, points to the nexus between the beautiful and the good in his *Tractatus* (1961): “Ethics and aesthetics are one” (6.421).

Although I might have gone too far in saying this, I felt, particularly at the age of seeking confidence and approval, ashamed of being “beautiful,” or afraid of being categorized as such. I took pains to “hide” whatever I thought to be pretty or beautiful in the beholder of a 15-year-old. For example, it was easy for me to wear only plain colours either grey or yellow, and to roll up my pants and sleeves to have a more “proletarian” than “bourgeois” appearance. But it was difficult when I chose to do something more actively damaging to the possibly and potentially “beautiful.” For example, ashamed of having a fair complexion, I exposed myself deliberately to the hot sunlight (e.g., without a straw hat or something to shield from becoming dark), as in transplanting rice seedlings in the paddy fields in summer when being dispatched to the countryside to “learn farming” and in enjoying dancing and performing in the open sunny air. But what a paradoxical contemplation: I wanted my skin to be “darker” but my public status “redder.”

For a long time, I was so ashamed of showing anything naturally good or beautiful, especially my allegedly “well-endowed” chest that I made myself a second bra over the regular one, a special bra made as a tight vest to be fastened by 8 buttons on one side, so that it could serve to flatten my too “showy” chest. For this “shame” was aggravated in me when one morning after our performance the night before, our class teacher called on me. Standing outside the classroom windows, often terrified on such occasions, I heard the teacher say, “You danced beautifully, people said, but your... your breasts were shaking on the stage....” Upon these words, I had an instant fit of “black-out” and could hear no more of what the teacher was uttering. I was too ashamed even to know where to hide at the

moment. Such a stigma for a 15-year-old in those days was far worse than the shame of being the whelp of a politically “black category.”

So I managed to do all that was needed in the hope of being acceptably “beautiful,” or explicitly “ugly.” (However, I knew that I would benefit more from the latter.) Either way would make me feel right or accepted. But it was only in dance and on the performing “stages” that I could maximize my free self to be as true, real, and authentic as I was, as I could be, and would be. The true representation of the kind, though limited, unfettered my authentic being, so that I could present and represent the real and the good. In concert with Wittgenstein’s assertion that ethics and aesthetics are one, we thus had some ethical import in our much more abstract representation, in which we could reveal the nature of goodness and which at the same time was to instruct us in goodness. And this should echo in Schiller’s (2004) expression: “As our nature finds itself, in the contemplation of the Beautiful, in a happy midway point between law and exigency, so, just because it is divided between the two, it is withdrawn from the constraint of both alike” (p. 78). Our contemplation or reflection of such living conditions connoted our first free relation to what surrounded us then, and thus turned it into our true selves and thus secured us from passion for life. Beauty, on this account, afforded us a special kind of aesthetic property.

### ***To Hope***

In those days, hope was the thickest straw that we could clutch at. Our aesthetic contemplation—understanding of our real beings, our anticipated desires, and our expectations of higher attainments—became one of the virtues in our personal and social lives, extending to reinforce our possibilities of profounder contemplation and hope. Like

other virtues, hope arises from our will to aim, to persist in surviving or transcending our circumstances, and to seek to be part of the existing world.

With hope through dancing, I survived the disasters that befell me. In 1977, one year after the Cultural Revolution came to an end, China's higher education finally resumed, after the long lapse of ten years! Although my father was still imprisoned, my brother Ming and I, fortunately enough, as those of the so-called "teachable sons and daughters," were admitted, one after another, to the same university after competitive entrance examinations. It was, however, those fears, worries, and efforts over the years—the stretching of mind and body in imaginative contemplations and fascination—that sustained us with ample room for even profounder reflections and higher hopes. In January 1981, I won (in a *pas de deux*) the first prize at China's First National University Dance and Singing Competition—the highest honour (it was said) for our university since its founding. In June of the same year, Ming risked his life in fire-fighting at our university library and saved the state's *Classic Chinese Dictionary* that was being compiled there. Later in the year, Ming was chosen as a National "Three Merits Student" representative to be reviewed by China's high officials in Beijing. Also, in January 1981, my father was released from prison and resumed (after being an "incorrigible reactionary academic authority" for 11 years!) his associate professor position in the Mathematics Department of his former university. Our clutching onto hope had bestowed on us many possibilities. When we hoped, we hoped for what we contemplated to be possible.

## **Conclusion: Arts Educate People to Be Free and Responsible**

*Regards to you!*

*The freedom of charming dignity—*

*Inviolable moral nobility of human nature.*

*Between the rule and the sublime*

*Arises no single indolence,*

*But gathers every consonant diligence.*

*The truest of the true never rankles,*

*And nothing ever shakes our authentic presence.*

As illustrated in the way we survived under conditions of severe subjugation, arts in general, and dance in particular, were thus conducive to both our epistemic and moral virtues through our artistic embodiment and aesthetic contemplation. Dance seemed to lead us to find the way through our limited existence to independence, reflection, and, ultimately, freedom. It may be that through the engagement with dance we appropriated the context for self-renewal or self-creation. As Schiller (2004) describes, we may have already, in our artistic endeavours, realised our “physical determination with a certain freedom that belongs to our spiritual nature—that is, according to the laws of Beauty” (p. 110), and thus, we reached our moral determination to hold our own existence accountable. Art, (especially tragedy, for Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, as for Aristotle in *Poetics*) afforded us opportunity to exercise our moral power to do what we ought to and needed to, and with the capacity to be free of our external “fetters” and internal limits, hence insinuating us into a condition of contentment and sublimation at a time of great political

and social instability. Art, then, was a powerful learning vehicle, upon which we had largely relied for a kind of humanity that was beyond us in China then, but could so remain with much benefit to our existence through an artistic mode of manifestation. This aesthetic form greatly enhanced the lives of the young whose families, such as my own, were the blacklisted or outcasts, and who had been deprived of their very means of human agency. And this means, which was the conditions of their humanity, had been renewed or even recreated through the various aesthetic modes.

In the face of the harsh reality, dominant as it was in our experiences, dance (and other forms of art) engaged our emotional and physical aims in that we became concerned with finding opportunities through responsibility and freedom, rather than through the passivity of victimization and subjugation, or (in Schiller's expression) "through an intermediate condition of aesthetic freedom" (p. 108). That is, we were thus committed to these activities, responsible for and responsive to our becoming active of contemplating, hence willing towards an aim through necessary condition. By this condition alone we can attain to social acceptance with a nobler confidence. As Schiller says, "there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic" (p. 108), because we authentically engaged ourselves with transitioning from the aesthetic condition to the epistemic and moral (from Beauty to truth and duty).

It might follow that when we were concerned, according to Schiller, with *what* we did, with the contents of our actions; we cared about the *way* in which we acted, "without thereby in the least acting counter to our physical aims" (p. 110). That is, our endeavours were directed strictly towards the form of our activities, as in those of *fundus*, *pirouettes*, *grand jetes* (we had Chinese equivalents for these technical ballet terms), and all that we

cared about and concentrated on; we were engaged with—“telling” the story of the poor little girl (in the ballet dance drama), who, upon her father’s death, was chased into the woods, and years of life in the wilderness changed her, turning her hair completely white (so was she called “white-haired girl”). This was the place wherein we were encouraged to maximize our desire for freedom out of our absolute spontaneity in a proud sense of responsibility for heeding and attaining our physical aims in dance. We danced and acted with absolute commitment to the story lines and the highly engaged combinations of graceful movements. And through this we transcended our circumstances. For Schiller, this is the education of humanity, because we could only accomplish such transcendence with education, and art, in this case, is the vehicle of education.

Although it may challenge us to accept this view of dance and education, especially in the context of a modern institutional curriculum, it is worthwhile to appreciate the purposes of dance, as Carr (1984) has long asserted, “by understanding the place of particular dances in different forms of human life and culture, and refining and reaffirming those purposes in education” (p. 76). My retrospective approach to the educational significance of artistic activities is to suggest that aesthetic virtues and moral agency could be cultivated in the arts. This, I believe, suggests that human virtues, moral powers, and political freedom—things that are essential for the educational formation of conscience—increase through artistic and aesthetic enactments. And such authentic engagement makes one undergo an aesthetic experience which personifies—in a free and responsible form—the pedagogy of a moral education.



## Chapter 4. The Tragic and Education by Virtue of Cathartic Action<sup>37</sup>

### Introduction

#### *Snapshot 1: Sichuan, China*

I was thirteen year old that year. One morning I was besieged on the school playgrounds in the midst of the morning recess, by a huge flock, girls and boys, teachers and passers-by. The late comers were jumping up and bouncing around to see who was encircled. Someone from the inner circle shouted out: “Small Trousers Legs! Cut them open!” Just in a sudden instant, the voice was joined by derisive sneers as if there was no stop note in the rhythm and melody: “Cut open small trousers legs!” The shouts engulfed the entirety of Neijiang No. 2 Middle School, echoing from building to building, classroom to classroom. Audaciously, I broke through the crowd, half running to my classroom; the first floor of the Teaching Building. The curious crowd followed her closely. I couldn’t lift up my head, and did not dare to look at the packed room or the head-filled classroom windows. I finally broke down, crying, and sinking my tearful eyes and bare face into my forearms so that I could seem to cover my legs and body as if they too were nude. I was exposed in the yet-so-besieged openness that it was as if not a drop of water could trickle through. The following day, I didn’t go to school. But the day after, I went back, as usual, as if nothing had happened two days before, the truth of which was, and is still, unknown to my parents.

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<sup>37</sup> This chapter is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at Philosophy of Education of Society of Great Britain (PESGB) 2009 annual conference and appearing in PESGB online conference program: <http://www.philosophy-of-education.org/conferences/pdfs/Chen.pdf>

***Snapshot 2: A Soldier in the Battle Trench (from Wilfred Owen's poem, "Exposure," 2008):***<sup>38</sup>

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...

Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.

...

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.

Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;

We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,

But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces -

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,

Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,

Is it that we are dying?

Although these two experiences are not equivalent, the similarities between them are highlighted as such: when forced to confront such tragic or traumatic scenes as if they were here and now, we are, instinctively, taken aback by the impact of our activated

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<sup>38</sup> An excerpt from *Exposure* by British World War I poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918).

emotions—such as, to be extreme, the fear, the pain, the suffering, the pity, and other unspeakably mixed sensations. This is all that patently overwhelmed the young girl in the milieu of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Wilfred Owen, a poet and soldier in the battlefield of the World War I. For the moment, we may feel our soul stunned by the tragic experience, and, at one and the same time, we may also feel our freedom of action impeded as if it were felt by the young Chinese girl and the English poet-soldier. When caught both physically and emotionally, as if paralyzed from any action, we vicariously experience, like the poet-soldier in the death-threatening trench, his “snow-dazed” stare, the “cringe in the holes,” and we fall “back on forgotten dreams.” Or we choose no other but we “[break] down, crying,” like the young Chinese girl, and, instinctively hide our as-if nude legs and bodies from the “besieged exposure” of a terrifying alienation.

The tearful lament of the girl and the drowsing stupor of sun-doziness that the poet-soldier stumbled in, upon which they both were to fall back in their unsurpassed fear and pity caused by the tragic or traumatic moments, are a momentary breaking-through for their deprived freedom: freedom from shame, fear, or death. Such, seemingly, is the unintentional reaction; to wit, the one when human beings are facing up to the extremity of human conditions—ones such as conscious danger or the exhaustion of their biological existence, and the ultimate condition—death. It is, however, imperative to note that it is not just an instinct of survival that causes one to react to such abject conditions encompassed by shame, terror, or death—conditions described in the aforementioned scenes. But what then undergirds individuals in the face of the tragic and the ultimate end—death?

## A Rationale for “Tragic Necessity”

To proceed with my present thesis of the tragic and catharsis in their relation to education, I need first of all to define tragedy and catharsis. The origin of the word tragedy is Greek *tragoidia*, “meaning song for the goat.” However, in understanding tragedy and the sense of the tragic, I must retrace Aristotle, who seems the first to define properly what tragedy is, as well as what it does. He offers, in the *Poetics*, his famous definition of tragedy:

A tragedy, then is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

(Aristotle, 1965, p. 348)

In this view, descriptive rather than prescriptive, the experience of tragedy was limited to dramas (e.g., the tragedy of King Oedipus); and the proper function, (or *ergon*, the Greek word literally meaning “the work”) of tragic drama is to arouse “pity and fear” and simultaneously to effect the catharsis or purgation of these emotions in the viewers.

Plays or dramas are written about “tragic” people, in which “pity and fear” are inspired by the misfortune of personages superior to ourselves, such great kings as Agamemnon or Oedipus, or princely figures such as Orestes. In understanding the cause of tragedy, we read Aristotle: “Their downfall is brought about not by vice but by some

great error or family of character” (Woodfin & Groves, 2002, p. 159). If this is exclusively true, Othello’s jealousy and Macbeth’s ambition—not “great errors” or “family of character” yet rather personal vices, errors, or flaws, shall we say—clearly show that Shakespearean tragedy deviates from Aristotelian norms. Similarly, in Arthur Miller’s modern tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* (1974), the tragedy of the protagonist Willie Loman is due simply to his innocent belief in the American Dream; and the notion of the tragic I am intending to unravel here also falls outside the category of Aristotle’s tragic hero and the plot of action.

Detailed discussion of tragedy and the connection between catharsis, pity and fear begins with Aristotle’s classic analysis in the *Poetics*; our discussion, however, should not, and cannot, end with it. As regards tragedy, Aristotle based his theory on induction from the only examples available to him: the tragedies of Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In the subsequent two thousand years or more, many new and artistically effective types of serious plots ending in a catastrophe have been developed—types that Aristotle had no way of foreseeing. Aristotle defines tragedy as “the imitation of an action...as having magnitude, complete in itself,” in the medium of poetic language, and in the manner of dramatic rather than narrative presentation, incorporating “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.” How we ought to interpret Aristotle’s catharsis has given rise to much dispute (which I do not intend here to discuss in any detail). In its connection to tragedy, catharsis has shown different shades of analysis since Aristotle: interpretations have been attempted in diverse spheres of the religious, the medical, the therapeutic, the moral/ethical, the psychological/psychiatric, and the aesthetic.

The word “catharsis,” derived from Greek word *Katharein* (meaning to “cleanse”), has allowed a number of more or less probable interpretations. It is variously translated as “purification”/ “cleansing” or, only, “purgation,” (Lucas, 1928) or sometimes as both. In relating catharsis to the tragic, “pity and fear,” Aristotle, remembering his medical training, asserted that “tragedy is a form of homeopathic treatment — curing emotion by means of an emotion like in kind but not identical” (Woodfin & Groves, 2006, p. 157). Catharsis is generally thought to refer to the audience and their perspective: Aristotle set out to account for the undeniable fact that many tragic representations of suffering and defeat leave an audience feeling not depressed, but relieved, or even exalted. This is as if something is exposed, shared (out of each person’s psyche as it were) then resolved and left behind. But some theorists have argued that it refers to the purgation of the tragic hero’s guilt. According to Gerald Else’s (1967) interpretation, Aristotle’s catharsis applies not to an effect on the audience, but to an element within the play itself. (In my view, Aristotelian catharsis can apply to both.) Catharsis signifies, as Else claims, the purgation of the guilt attached to the hero’s tragic act, through the demonstration in the course of the drama that the hero performed this act without knowledge of its nature. As such, it would seem reasonable to understand catharsis as referring to the sensation or literary effect, in that catharsis represents and embodies a process, a transformative process in the hero that would aesthetically transcend and ideally overcome an audience during and upon finishing watching a tragedy.

In order, to focus my thesis on human tragic experience and how it is relevant to education, let me pause here and think about this question: How does tragedy —however defined by Aristotle, or created by Shakespeare or Miller —have anything to do with

ordinary people in their ordinary lives? In other words, how can ordinary people translate the experience of the tragedy in the play and cathartic action thereof into their own lives and experiences? And more specifically, how is the tragic necessarily called for in their education? I shall thus explore the notion of catharsis in discussing the function of such emotionally transformative purgation in people's tragic experiences in relation to a primal willingness to suffer and to sublimate their suffering. I will go beyond the sense of catharsis described in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and come to terms to perpetuate sublimation through the tragic experience.

That I bring tragic experience and catharsis into the domain of education, or into an evocation of educational relevance, is not because I intend to magnify such experience and hold this educational evocation under the spotlight for the sake of this magnification. Rather, I call the tragic necessary because it serves as an aesthetic process of transformation—an aesthetic purgation. I seek to explore how one's tragic or traumatic experience impacts one's confrontation with, acceptance of, and reconciliation with the tragic situation.

This process, which I call “sublimation of self-overcoming,” derived from humans' primal or ontological willingness to suffer, occurs through the emotional purification of the self, just as the members of the audience in watching a tragedy are themselves going through a release of repressed emotion or energy in encountering the aroused “fear and pity.”

Nietzsche (2003), in *The Birth of Tragedy*, views Greek tragedy as if it had, to quote Hill, “an ethical significance that could give meaning to a life” (p. 6). For Nietzsche, tragedy needs not only “to make genuine culture possible, but to render human

life meaningful and satisfying” (Hill, 2007, p. 17). As such, Nietzsche looks for a way to use tragedy, and art in general, to make life worth living. And this is what I seek in examining how individuals’ tragic and traumatic experiences give meaning to their lives and make their lives worth living.

Before I proceed any further, let me say that it is not my intention here to discuss political or ethical issues, such as those related to wars as in the case of the poet-soldier in the World War I, or the Chinese Cultural Revolution as in the case of the young girl. Rather, my intention is oriented toward the immanence of individuals in their interaction with the conditions that confront their primal ontological force—a kind of willingness and agency to suffer the consequence.

### **Accepting the Tragic and Suffering**

We do not recognize that there is as much freedom and latitude in our acceptance of the tragic as in that of joy and pleasure. For it is within humans’ capability to find accepting pain and suffering no less spacious than merely encountering and rejecting them. According to Michel de Montaigne (trans.1976), pain and grief should be confined, not cultivated, but at the same time recognized as necessary foils to pleasure and happiness. Much in the same way, and even emphasizing more the profundity of the “foils,” is the assertion made by Chinese ancient thinker Mengzi, one of the leading figures of Confucianism, who wrote, “天将降大任于斯人也, 必先苦其筋骨, 饿其体肤.” We humans must accept suffering and pain as necessary in making experience of the greatest capacity available and possible for the most challenging human conditions. Further, to



confront and accept pain and suffering is to cultivate the individual's capacity for creative transformation itself. Acceptance transforms and perpetuates sublimation of self-overcoming through the tragic experience, much in the same way as Aristotle's notion of catharsis of emotion accomplished it through the aroused "pity and fear" in experiencing the destruction of the tragic heroes in tragedy.

As I have stated earlier, it is not just an instinct of survival alone for humans to react to abject conditions encompassed by shame, terror, or death, as described in the aforementioned experiences of the young Chinese girl and the English poet-soldier respectively in their tragic and traumatic situations. Nor is it, as in tragic dramas of ancient Greeks, the hero's courageous deed: "a willingness to act and speak"; which, as Hannah Arendt (1998) emphasizes, is what "we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero" (p. 186). Rather, it is an action that is "necessarily and primarily related to human willingness to suffer the consequences" (p. 186).

It is this "willingness" humans immanently possess that compels us to face any extreme abjectness—suffering, pain, terror, humiliation, or even death. I have called this willingness inherent in humans the primal or ontological human force. For not only am I referring to the heroic courage that takes various forms of demonstration and reification in tragic dramas as well as in other art works, but I am also applauding ordinary people in ordinary lives—vis-à-vis the allegedly war soldiers and "heroes"—for their "non-glorified" deeds or accomplishments, such as depicted with regard to the poet-soldier and his comrades in the bullet-streaked trench:

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,  
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;  
  
(Owen, in *Exposure*)

In their willingness to suffer the consequences, they watched the flying bullets and flowing flakes that were “wandering up and down the wind’s nonchalance.” They waited; however, said the poet-soldier, “But nothing happens.”

But nothing happens! What was to happen? What was expected to happen that did not happen? Willingly, they were facing and expecting any, even ultimate, consequences.

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,  
  
Is it that we are dying? ...  
  
(Owen, in *Exposure*)

Facing the direst situation of death, the poet-soldier asked “Is it that we are dying?”—a heroic deed, if I may suggest, is put so well, like the exclamation of the tragic hero par excellence, Hamlet, who questions in his famous monologue “To be or not be!” Or less heroically, when I skipped one day from school after my humiliating exposure and alienation on school playgrounds, but more courageously, “went back, as usual, as if nothing had happened.”

The willingness or ontological force to think, speak, or act in a certain way does not have to be portrayed as the heroic as in ancient Greek tragedies. It is a force that compels humans to respond to a dire encounter. Here I would like to quote Arendt (1998),

who writes, “The extent of this original courage, without which action and speech and therefore, according to the Greeks, freedom, would not be possible at all, is not less great and may even be greater if the ‘hero’ happens to be a coward” (pp. 186-187).

Certainly, the extent of human willingness to suffer, for the poet, as for me as a young girl, is no less great, and “may even be greater” (to refer to Arendt’s words), whether or not they were seen as heroes or just ordinary people. It is this ordinariness of people that I aim to focus on in revealing what Arendt refers to as human “willingness” or “original courage” in the face of the tragic. Nonetheless, we humans skip, or try to avoid, consciously or unconsciously, any such tragic or traumatic experiences in life. That is for sure!

However, for Nietzsche, accepting tragedy is symptomatic of human strength, whereas denying it symptomatic of weakness. (I shall not estimate whether this is Nietzsche’s prejudice: a praise of strength and a disdain for weakness.) Here I shall just follow Nietzsche in his view that the tragic effect in tragedy is pleasurable “when tragedy portrays the destruction of characters with whom we identify” (Hill, 2007, p. 20). The crux of Nietzsche’s answer is, as Hill (2007) writes:

[T]hat something in tragedy inspires the audience to adopt the perspective of the world will itself, for whom every agony is also ecstatic pleasure. If we can come to perceive in our own sufferings not individual failure but the ecstasy of the world will, we will experience an energizing rapture. (p. 20)

...

Here I bring back Wilfred Owen's poem "Exposure" as an example. The poet described the battlefield: he was in the trench, exposed to all the bullets, his familiar background, or his cultural landscape, was taken away—exposed here and now in the bare landscape without cultural shields, as if stripped of everything; what was left was only the core of the species—the bare humanity, as Arendt frames it. Left was the bare being of humanity. What then was there for him, as well as for the thirteen-year-old Chinese girl, to hold onto? Under what conditions could a person find something to hang onto?

This compels us to fully recognize the possibilities of the human capacity to encounter pain and suffering and demonstrate our realizable aspirations. This human ontological possibility coincides with the Aristotelian idea of moving from potential to actual existence. Thus, the ontological vocation of humans is to actualize their potential aspirations. And this is all (!) that is rooted in their ontological potency of a willingness to bear the consequences of suffering. To humans, even if the tragic or suffering were imminent or unavoidable—such as death—recognition of our bare humanity and its primal forces would still be necessary for our encountering with suffering. It is this sensitivity of our willingness to endure suffering and the integration of primal consciousness that bring humans sustainability in the face of death.

### **Reaching the State of "Discovery"—A Cathartic Moment**

In tragedy, catastrophe, or the outcome decided by the death of the hero, where the action or intrigue ends in failure for the protagonist, the mystery is solved or the

misunderstanding cleared away. The common term for this precipitating final scene is the *dénouement* (French for “unknotting”) which involves in many plots a reversal, or else we have Aristotle’s term, *peripety*, alluding to the hero’s fortunes, failure, or destruction. The reversal frequently depends on a discovery (for Aristotle, *anagnorisis*). This is the moment of recognition by the protagonist of something hitherto unknown to him: e.g., the fact of Iago’s lying treachery dawns upon Othello. The notion of discovery I am referring to here is a recognition upon which a self-overcoming is reached, thus reaching a state of wonder or discovery: a cathartic moment that touches on the sublime.

In an endeavour to discuss this state of discovery or the moment of catharsis, I shall now turn to Hegel in referring to his Dialectic Method (in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 1964). The reason is that Hegel was, as Abdulla (1985) claims, “the first thinker to make catharsis a universal phenomenon, not one which is merely aesthetic” (p. 4). To put it briefly, Hegel’s dialectic method begins with a *thesis* that moves to its opposite, the *antithesis*, by principle of negativity. It is *via negativa* that a new state, called *synthesis* (Mueller, 1958; Abdulla, 1985), (though Hegel himself never named as such), is arrived at through the clash of the two opposite forces. This new state of synthesis, while sharing traits of both thesis and antithesis, produces a discovery of the two opposite forces, or “a reconciliation of the two,” in Abdulla’s expression. In the Hegelian view, all things are related and nothing stands in isolation. In other words, everything, in one way or another influences and is being influenced by the forces around it.

This Hegelian dialectical procedure reveals conflicted ideas or beliefs not as disjunctions but as conjoined, hence an idea of truth will emerge in radical opposition to the prevailing one. Such is the *synthesis*, a category of *becoming*, thus in essence, is

catharsis. And this cathartic change is determined to develop into a new (“purified”) becoming or synthesis. Echoing Abdulla’s assertion that Hegel’s Dialectic Method provides us with “a fruitful method of understanding catharsis” (p. 4), I hold that this method guides us to understand catharsis in a view extending from a purely literary phenomenon through to experiencing the artistic or aesthetic aspects of catharsis that function ultimately in affinity with human history, with ordinary life and reality.

In parallel with Hegelian synthesis as a cathartic moment out of the two opposite forces, Nietzsche’s notion of catharsis stems from the dialectic of the *Dionysian* and *Apollonian* as an explanation of the tragic effect, thus reversing Aristotle’s catharsis theory. Nietzsche names these two important terms (in his *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, 2003) after the two Greek gods, Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysus was the god of wild flute music, of wine and intoxication, of orgies and festivals, representing the wild, disordered, and unrestrained spirit of man, and Apollo —the god of restraint, harmony, and balance, representing in man the spirit of order as it appears in “classical” Greek sculpture and architecture. For Nietzsche, tragedy is the product of a tension between these two human impulses: it comes about as a synthesis of Apollo and Dionysus, the impulses or forces existing in human mind. But it is only after the *recognition* of the Dionysian that the Apollonian can triumph. This “recognition,” in a Hegelian *via negativa*, demonstrates that eventually one must give way to the other, offering it the recognition it seeks (Hill, 2007, p. 184).

This recognition, synthesis, discovery, or reconciliation is a cathartic process wherein during a contemplation of the tragic representation — identifying with the tragic hero as only an individual human being but an individualized Apollonian form, or a force

of *antithesis* (e.g., fear, evil, repulsion) —each audience or individual in life comes to feel that despite his or her own suffering and failure, the hero too is an appearance of Dionysus (just as Nietzsche regarded himself), or a force of *thesis* (e.g., pity, good, attraction). In this cathartic moment, reasoning or rationality is possible after we exercise the power to harness irrationality, chaos, wildness (the Dionysian). That is: both Hegel and Nietzsche, in their treatment of catharsis, emphasize the dialectic of interrelatedness between the two opposite forces or impulses that externalize and yet internalize to create a state of revelation, discovery through negation, or self-overcoming.

It is through this dialectic interrelatedness that one can understand the reality embedded in the social context that is not given explicitly. Nor is that reality static; rather, it is shifting and negotiable in a transformative process. And this interrelatedness, whether temporal or spatial, is in fact the present moment that contains all that there is. It is a ground in between the past and future. The sense of interrelatedness, regardless of whether that sense was developed out of a Western or Eastern heritage, is rooted in these ancient cultures whose philosophies were grounded in relatedness. As such, the sense of individuality discovered or reconciled in the cathartic process through “pity and fear,” good and evil, compassion and repulsion, is real only in the context of being associated with other members of society.

Catharsis is therefore an important transformative discovery, which is one of the process-oriented parts of tragedy Aristotle discussed. The spectator went through a tragic, dramatic experience and passed catharsis, realizing that catharsis was not the final state in itself but was rather reaching a state of synthesis, recognition, understanding, or discovery. This is the moment of wonder that we find beautiful—a glimpse of the

moment of sublimation—and that affirms the beauty of life, despite the fear encompassing us. After he killed his wife, Desdemona, Othello felt that he was taken from everything, and realised that he erred. It was the speech he made after the revelation of truth that manifested the moment in which the audience finds magnitude and beauty! Such a moment is invariably one reaching the state of “wonder” in literary form.

As audience, we view the acting out of tragedy and take that same form, relating that transformative process to our own lives. By transformation we mean the new birth of self: that we are something here, and then a set of things moves us, and then we are different, out of it! This is related to what Nietzsche calls “self-overcoming.” It is vitally important for any art —tragedy, in particular —to see the relationship between the actor on the stage and the audience. And whenever a discovery or reconciliation occurs, cathartic moments take place, here and there. In those instants we become self-conscious; that is, we see the limits of the tragic, and, simultaneously, what limits it, viewing the two tensions or forces that bind the situation, including those which bind us. In this way we have first and foremost been deprived of our subjectivity and have become an object in someone else’s world. This process alternates between the Dionysian aspect of humans (representing impulses or forces that are the primitive and primordial) and the Apollonian aspect (representing rational and harmonious forces). In this process, a sort of response or reaction stems from the change of state —cathartic transformation. Herein likely lies some level of fear in all of us, of which we are seldom, if ever, conscious: that this someone else may have the power to destroy us, not physically, but in the sense of depriving us of the power that goes with being a self-willed centre of existence.

In further understanding a Nietzschean view that existence is a struggle and life



is simply a will to power, I further emphasize that the will to power lies in self-overcoming. The idea of self is centralized somehow in the process of overcoming in the encounter with the world. So it is in a process of subject-realization that one becomes very conscious in confronting crises and pain, ranging from cruel torture to daily boredom. When encountering crises, one is utterly awakened, as the poet-soldier confronting death in the battlefield, and I, the young Chinese girl besieged by personal and political crisis during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Terror and suffering taught them how to live.

### **Educating So That One May Endure Suffering and Pain**

It is essential to reiterate that catharsis is transformation, primarily through art: a purgation of such emotions as “pity and fear,” and, possibly, of extended connotations: pain, suffering, or terror of death. The fear and suffering endured by a thirteen-year-old girl (-cum-me) and the soldier recounted above had the potential for them to experience their cathartic becoming, because they overcame themselves in their contingent conditions. And their lived cathartic experience—self-overcoming—is emulated by the “tragic heroes” in the tragedy, that is, their suffering, realization of the self in human incompleteness, their self-overcoming and self-mastering, all leading them to cathartic transformation and then to emergence into their own freedom.

However, the cathartic moment is not something teachable. Rather, it is the *process* of catharsis—a synthesis or becoming—that is transformational, and thus educational (transformation in its own right is educational). The cathartic moment leaves

“spectators” or ones who are involved in the cathartic context (art in general and tragedy in particular) changed, and “being changed” or transformed is an uplifted form of self-overcoming. It is a process of sublimation of self-overcoming, to refer to my earlier phrase. Hence, it brings about a spiritual renewal or satisfying release from the tension one experiences in the tragic setting. It is in this sublimation of self-overcoming that the educational implications lie.

I propose that what we can teach is to embrace conditions wherein cathartic experiences occur. The reason is that through cathartic action, we allow ourselves to be elevated from going through the tragic moments (as in watching tragedy). It is these cathartic experiences that relieve us of the burden of terrible memories, at the same time releasing hidden creative forces and invoking compassion, goodness, sacrifice and other sublimated qualities through our self-overcoming—in our facing up to pain, suffering, or death. For this sublime quality elevates or exalts humans, especially in dignity and honour, thus rendering finer qualities of purity or excellence. It is at this moment, when the two tensions—Hegelian “forces” or Nietzschean “impulses”—are communicated through a cathartic or sublime self-overcoming, that education takes place. In other words, education takes place in the transformative process by virtue of cathartic action and the sublimation of self-overcoming.

Let me just pause to go back to my early life tale recounted at the beginning of this chapter. In 1967, in the year after the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a shocking calamity befell my family; being only six years old, I became a target as a member of a “blacklisted” family. My “exposure” and “humiliation” on the school playground that day was but one of the many subsequent traumatic incidents I

underwent. However, at that moment—the tragic moment—what I experienced served for me as a self-consciousness of the abject situation and as a change of my position in the eyes of the members of society. I suddenly and necessarily came to activate an inner force to face up to such an ordeal. My will to power and to live, once perhaps dormant deep in my original resources, now was actualized in an urgent call to face up to the now-confronted, unavoidable abjectness of life.

Such a deep-rooted self-consciousness (as described in Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche) became salient in my self-movement, self-identity, and “self-overcoming.” I, as a young person, endured pain and suffering, through activating the fear, pain, and trauma of herself *via negativa*. This negativity is a form of self-overcoming, one that allowed me to endure and master the pain and suffering when confronted by shame and terror. What lies deeper within this self-overcoming and self-mastering is that the will to care, to give, to protect, and to sacrifice is perpetuated together with the will to live. That is why only the day after the open humiliation and alienation on the school playgrounds, “she went back, as usual, as if nothing had happened ...” without even telling my parents what I had encountered. Having learned to endure the suffering by myself, I did not, nor did I wish to, vex my parents with what I thought might bring pain and suffering to them. I simply accepted and reconciled myself with the confronted situation on my own and in willingness. I therefore converted my inferiority in the inevitable encounter into something of higher esteem or worth: not only to live but also to live in the beauty of caring about others.

I thus had obtained the transformative quality through cathartic action that allowed me to survive, to move, and to go from one moment to another: to continue to

move on. Similar to one watching a tragedy, this is the real tragic experience of mine, as “the young girl.” These tragic and traumatic experiences of my life allowed me at the moment and continued to allow me to become conscious of my confronted, reconciled, and self-overcome identity I always had had, and to be able see the beauty of life. Necessarily and inevitably I went through my own sublimation of self-overcoming. This is a moment of educational transformation for me as for anyone who goes through such a process when cathartic action takes place.

It is my intention here simply to draw our attention to the educational relevance resting upon the cathartic moments, found either in Owen’s poem, or in my anecdote, or in other similar situations. When we talk about tragic transformation in an educational context, we first realise that tragic and traumatic experience can take many forms. Awareness of the relationship, however, between tragedy and trauma in history defines the experience of modernity for individuals. The most dramatic forms are wars (e.g., the world wars and civil wars), revolution (e.g., French Revolution and Chinese Cultural Revolution), authoritarianism, oppression, such that in the domain of culture and multiculturalism in our modern and post-modern eras, political and economic changes (e.g., the current global economical crises) that fragment and decentre individuals from their lives thus define their traumatic experience.

In this sense, tragedy links the individual consciousness and the historical process. The tragic gives meaning and form to the confusions, perplexities, and pain of the traumatized individuals. Tragedy thus can be articulated as a human experience seen through art. What is perhaps not so well recognized is the potential for a more open and inclusive understanding that, through the circumstances of history as trauma, teachers can

also give shape and meaning to that experience in the forms of tragedy. Therein lie the implications that tragedy has for conceptualizing learning and teaching. Education understood in this way ennoble the individual, in the same way that Euripides ennobled Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Taulis* or Shakespeare ennobled King Lear.

Education is typically not about teaching people to endure pain; but we cannot escape the “ultimate concern”—death. But we can still not escape the “ultimate concern”—death. Therefore, education has (or should have) an agenda of preparing the young to confront crises, pain and suffering. We humans need to have some resources to draw from in actualizing our ontological forces that have been confronted and simultaneously sparked by repression or any form of the tragic, of trauma, or of crisis. Thus, education in a broader sense permeates every aspect of human life, including tragedy and catharsis.

This is what I believe a real education is for: to prepare the young, in a different light, to form their lives by actuating their ontological resources so as to adjust to what they will inevitably face in any situation and at any state of their lives. That way, they are able to accept and change any inevitability rather than to resist it or try to hide from it. For them, it is to accept the responsibility and to act accordingly. When we understand our own conditions and our use of them, we humans seek no other conditions. What we need to know and find lies in what is inside, and not at all outside, ourselves. To educate with that end in mind means that we need to foreground and empower such understanding and recognition.

## Chapter 5. Choosing “The Ferry of Life”: On Moral Agency as a Mean in Education<sup>39</sup>

### Introduction

Human agency and actions cannot be separated. Agency is the capability and the power of actions (Rapport & Overing, 2000). The intrinsic relationship between them is thus not difficult to discern: we proceed from this source that drives us to act and to which we commit ourselves by action. With agency, our actions and choices may be seen to entail a variety of rational features such as consciousness, reflection, meaning, intention. Furthermore, every action and choice we make throughout our lives contributes to individual qualities such as self-consciousness, self-reflection, self-discipline, self-overcoming, self-education, and so forth. Since we cannot avoid actions or choices, all of which are thus purposive, our agency, for ethical and practical purposes, is necessary. This necessity is what drives humans to have goals. For human life, as Aristotle proposes, consists of the pursuit of ends. In this sense, justifications for the end or ends at which humans ought to aim are inescapably tied to outlooks on human nature, which in turn determines choices and actions.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, Aristotle sets out to discover the nature of the end or ends at which people aim (Aristotle, 1998). This nature shows, as Aristotle points out, that humans regard their ends as valuable, because all human actions taken together comprise the good and “all knowledge and every inquiry aims at some good” (*NE*, p. 4). This defines the ends of education: empowering people’s function and perfecting their moral qualities through either

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<sup>39</sup> This chapter has been previously published in G. Biesta (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education 2010* (pp. 194-201). Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.

being taught or self-taught. People's function throughout this process is "an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle"; when the action is well performed, it is in accordance with virtue and reason (*NE*, pp. 13-14).

Building on the discussion in Chapter 2, this chapter is an examination of moral agency as a metaphysical state of character in the person, which becomes apparent in the activities of the soul. In my analysis I take a renewed interest in traditional metaphysical issues (for example, the nature of human beings, morality) by discussing the idea of moral agency as an object of ethics and moral education with a focus on a mean state between experiences and choices, between the agentic moral state and educational efforts. The analysis is divided into four parts. The first section begins with a preliminary task of outlining Aristotle's conception of virtue and the Golden Mean, and his ideas that the mean is the good or the right, and the choice, as a result of our "rational principle," is the mean relative to us. Next, I compare Confucius's *Doctrine of the Mean*, which views the mean as both an ideal state of virtue and a method for conduct to the Aristotelian mean. The third part explores a disposition toward the mean state in which a virtuous choice is made by empowered agency gained through experiences. Questions concerning self-discipline, self-reflection, and courage ensure that moral choices approach the mean state, and such qualities can be inculcated through education. In the final section, self-discipline and courageous acts are defined as virtuous agency of the mean in educational practices—teaching or self-teaching. Moral agency is thus heightened by an effort of choice between any extreme position or method in order to achieve the "highest virtue" (for Confucius) and the "perfect virtue" (for Aristotle) in activities of the soul. I hope to show that a person can make a moral effort to cultivate virtue—a state of the person's character that is related to choice and therefore can be sought, rightly

and practically, hence educationally.

### **Aristotle's Golden Mean**

Aristotle's concept of the mean in relation to virtue remains an essential element of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, within which lies a consistent and coherent ethical theory. In Aristotle's definition,

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (*NE*, p. 39)

Aristotle argues that virtue is “a state of character”; it is not “a passion,” or “a faculty” (*NE*, p. 35). Virtue, being “a state of character”, is “lying in the mean”; hence, “virtue is a kind of mean,” and “it aims at what is intermediate” (*NE*, p. 38). The mean, therefore, is the “perfect virtue” (*NE*, p. 24). Following Aristotle, intermediate is the equal; thus, “equality implies at least two things” (*NE*, p. 112). For example, temperance is the mean with regard to pleasures and pains, and courage is the mean with regard to feelings of fear and confidence: “while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward” (*NE*, p. 40). The mean, the intermediate, or the equal, however, is not a simple mathematical mean that occupies a middle position—as an arithmetical or geometrical mean; rather, metaphysically and qualitatively, it is a mean that may not always be equidistant between the two possible extremes, and that may not be the same for everyone or under all



circumstances; rather, it is “the mean relative to us.”

“Relative to us” is what Aristotle seeks to define within the inherent nexus of virtue and the mean. This, in a more extended sense, means that the act must be done at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way. The rightness or the propriety in human action is considered throughout the ten books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The relativity between virtue and the mean is the nature of this state of character in a particular person. Virtue is an intermediate state, a middle state, a balanced or tranquil state of character in the person, relative to whoever views and possesses it.

Furthermore, this state of character is concerned with “choice,” that is, as Aristotle defines it, an adoption of action decided on after deliberation; choice is “thought to be most closely bound up with virtue” (*NE*, p. 53). Between character and action resides choice, and Aristotle considers choice to differentiate the character of individuals better than actions do. A virtuous choice is achieved by those who act in the right way, with the right persons, in the right direction, in the right place, and at the right moment. Choice, thus, is the adoption of an action arrived at by such a process. Virtue is divided by Aristotle into two kinds: intellectual virtue (or excellence) and moral virtue (or excellence). The latter is “a disposition to choose the mean” (*NE*, p. 36) and thus be obedient to a principle, whereas the former is an excellence that apprehends such a principle. In this view, “human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence” (*NE*, p. 14) in the sense either of yielding to *a rational principle* or of apprehending *such a principle* — in other words, it represents either good moral activity or good intellectual activity. It is the “rational principle” that determines “the mean relative to us,” namely, an individual's virtuous choice.

## Confucius's Contemplation of the Mean

*The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*) is one of *The Four Books* of Confucian philosophy and teachings; it is central to the Confucian canonical scriptures.<sup>40</sup> For Confucius, as for Aristotle, the mean is *De/Te*, the virtue. The mean is the highest as such and the power of the “Middle Use” is transcendent, as Confucius says in *The Analects*. But the common people are short of this highest virtue for a long time (Confucius, trans. 2006a, Bk. 6, chap. 27). The following passage furthers our understanding of the Confucian mean:

When joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure have not yet arisen, it is called the mean (centrality, equilibrium). When they arise to their appropriate levels, it is called “harmony.” The mean is the great root of all-under-heaven.  
“Harmony” is the penetration of the Way through all-under-heaven.  
(Confucius, trans. 2006b, chap. 1, 1-6.)

As such, the mean is the ideal state of virtue with things at “their appropriate levels” and thus in the balanced and harmonious state. The mean is also the method that guides us to do things, when everything that reaches a measured expression “is called harmony,” which presents us the Dao, the Way through which proper and right things are obtained. Confucius's ideal of life lies in its recognition of due degree, due time, and due way “without excessive deliberation.” This view calls forth a relation to Aristotle's mean, with its emphasis on the rightness and propriety of things (for example, at the right time, in the right place, in the right ways).

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<sup>40</sup> *The Four Books* are *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects* (of Confucius), and *Mengzi* (or *Mencius*).

*The Doctrine of the Mean* thus becomes the guide to perfecting oneself through its demonstration of the usefulness of a golden path to gain the highest virtue, with a focus on the *Dao* (Way), which furnishes the Way of harmony. Confucius's concept of the mean, thus, describes the subtle underlying principles of the entire cosmos, giving special attention to relationships. It is the Way of harmony that can be attained through reciprocal obligations and duties within human relations that have structured the social order. The five important relations, called *wulun* (that is, five kinds of human relations), outlined in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, are "between ruler and minister, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. These five [relations] constitute the Way throughout the land" (Confucius, trans. 2006b, chap. 20, 8-9). Through these relations we learn humanity and human sympathy. Through this path, we will arrive at *sandade*—three attained virtues: wisdom, goodness, and courage, which brings an integration of virtues and knowledge (or skills).

It should be noted that while some differences between Aristotle's concept of the mean and that of Confucius may be as interesting and important as their similarities, I shall not delineate them in this essay. Like Aristotelian virtue—a state of character, lying in the mean, Confucian virtue (*De*, or spiritual power) consists in reaching the highest level of sincerity and virtue, which resides within harmony. The mean—*Dao*, or the Way, in the cosmic order—refers to the ethical way of life, or the way to pursue a good life. It is important to note that the Confucian mean, or the highest virtue, does not necessarily mean there is no strife, no conflict, but it is precisely through overcoming strife, opposition, conflict, or tension that we can reach a realm of harmony. And characteristic of this realm is people's ability to actively face the strife of life through trying to achieve the highest state of a

harmonious life and world. This Way renders in people a sense of social responsibility, of which Confucius was an exemplary model. I am here reminded of a little anecdote of Confucius's later years.

In his old age, Confucius was experiencing social upheavals. He summoned his pupils to travel across various countries to call on people to change the chaotic society. One time he was with one of his best-known pupils named Zilu on a horse carriage and came to a river. While trying to find the ferry to cross the river, Confucius told Zilu to go and ask the two plough hermits where the river could be forded. When the two men knew that it was Kong Qiu (Confucius) from Lu country, one of them said, "In that case he already knows where the ford is (or should, because he claims to be a Sage)." Another also told Zilu, when he discovered that Zilu was a follower of Kong Qiu of Lu, "Under Heaven there is none that is not swept along by the same flood. Such is the world and who can change it? As for you, instead of following someone who himself is dodging this way and that, you would do better to follow us in shunning this whole generation of men." And with that the man went on farming.

Hearing of this, Confucius (trans. 2006a) felt rueful and said, "One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I am not to be a man among other men, then what am I to be? If the Way prevailed under Heaven, I should not be trying to alter things" (Bk. 18, chap. 6.).

Confucius never shuns the strife of life, insisting that the least that people should do during periods of chaos and upheaval is to maintain personal integrity and heed their own moral inclinations. This anecdote demonstrates that a person may have to make many choices throughout life, many times one has to find a ferry to ford the "waters of life," and the choice of a way requires moral effort. The subsequent monologues are provided for the purposes of

illustrating how an ordinary person can and must choose his or her own “ferry of life” in order to ford the blocking chaotic waters.

### **Choosing One’s Own Ferry**

Yet choice making is a philosophical and educative process concerned with actions within which different desires, pressures, and attitudes fight it out, eventually resulting in a decision and action. In addition, it is an ethical effort called up by the conscious will for the *self* to control the conflict in the name of higher desires, or morality. Moving forward from the Aristotelian and Confucian Golden Mean, I maintain that choice is an educational effort that is made to achieve, ethically, an active end that lies in the mean between erratic impulses and the resolute steadfastness of the soul. This is an ethical act because choice requires us to bring our soul to these activities. It is a virtuous act because putting our character into our actions requires both a natural disposition to do so and our intentional efforts.

In the process of committing ourselves to the mean state in accordance with virtue and reason, choice making is the mean through which we endeavour to put our soul into actions through a moral struggle. Such is virtue, lying in the mean that is relative to us, or the *Dao*—the Way. Virtue in this case has an essential connection with shame, fear, happiness, pain, and courage. It is not by indifference to these, but by making choices in the right way and to the right degree, that we become virtuous.

### **Monologue 1: Self-Discipline—A Way to Survive**

During the five years of my elementary schooling, classes were often

suspended due to the constant political upheaval during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. There was a lack of schooling at every level of education. Higher education during the ten-year Cultural Revolution was completely suspended; elementary and secondary schooling, though active, were regularly interrupted. Deprived of any hope of pursuing postsecondary education, we were motivated to become skilled and talented in areas such as sports, dancing, and singing. Having been labelled as “whelp” of the “Five Black Categories”—namely, the classes of social pariahs<sup>41</sup>— we had to find a means to survive. That was why my father and mother started me in dance at a very young age while my brother Ming took up musical instruments and sports. Most of my elementary school days were spent rehearsing and performing the “Eight Modern Revolutionary Model Operas” (including two Chinese ballet operas) advocated by Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. When I was nine, I was chosen to join the “Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team” of Neijiang No. 8 Elementary School, singing and dancing the “Modern Revolutionary Model Operas.”

From a Chinese proverb that “a clumsy bird should start flying earlier,” I learned that I, a “black” (meaning “bad”) bird, needed to fly harder, much harder than those from the “Red” families and even other “Black” families, because the “black” situation of my family was much worse. My father’s great-grandfather served in the feudal Imperial Palace of the Qing Dynasty (China’s last dynasty), his grandfather was a Qing high official, and both were prominent artists and intellectuals in the late

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<sup>41</sup> These included landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists, all subject to reform.

Qing. My father himself was allegedly a “counterrevolutionary,” “bourgeois academic authority,” “traitor,” “and more, all “targets” of the Cultural Revolution. I came to learn that I had to do exceptionally well in order to survive under those conditions, let alone get a job or become a person of respect when I grew up.

At age nine I set myself extra hours of training and practicing, both in school and after school. I was always the last to leave and the first to arrive at the practice room or platform. For a long time, every morning, no matter in summer or winter, whether I was sound or sick, I got up in the dark (on winter days) and walked to the school to start training myself in ballet technique. Although I never missed once, I still wanted to “fly” and jump ten times higher than other members on the team. I still dreamed of excelling in order to live a respected life while, at the same time, I watched as my father was taken away on numerous occasions and locked up in a “cowshed” or prison.

I advanced in dancing and was chosen, at the age of ten, to assume the principal role, Xi'er, in the modern ballet opera “The White-Haired Girl.” Soon I became popular as a ballerina, and came to be known locally as Xiao Chen Hong (Little Chen Hong). For quite a few years, the local people thought that my family name was Xiao (Little). I liked being called Xiao Chen Hong because it made me feel accepted. And for a short time I seemed to be transformed — no longer seen as belonging to the “black categories” but now identified as the other child, called Little Chen Hong, a name that offered acceptance.

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I had chosen to find myself an identity through self-discipline as the “Way” to suffer

those inevitable conditions of life that I and my family had to bear in that social order. This inevitability compelled me to find my own “ferry” to ford the choppy waters of life, a life I had no choice but to lead, or to find “a means to survive,” as I described it. My choice and actions driven by my longing for acceptance enabled me to strive for any available paths to “live a respected life” My higher moral agency through my volition and resolution was not only actualized but also strengthened through the activities of (self-) training and practicing dance, through playing Xi’er (the white-haired girl) and other leading roles in Chinese ballet operas. I had gone through a state of character concerned with my robust choice of the middle way between my wish to survive and the conditions to which I was confined.

### **Monologue 2: Courage — Bearing “A Red Stigma”**

After countless futile attempts, I gave up, for a while, my dream of becoming a professional ballerina. I just took pride in often being “borrowed” (a word often used in those days) to dance and perform in art troupes or companies. At age fifteen, I was asked to perform with a local army art troupe. It was composed of over forty members of all ages, “borrowed” from all walks of life. As we were representing the People’s Liberation Army (the most respected and admirable position and class in China then), we were temporarily “drafted.” The most exciting moment was the ceremony of presenting the army uniforms. What a moment of pride and honour for a young person like me! Just to imagine how beautiful, dashing, and dignified one would feel wearing such a uniform, especially with the red collar badges and cap insignia of the red star. This was a



dream that I had never dared believe would come true!

But this moment became the most humiliating one for me, because I alone was never called to the platform to receive the uniform. Later on, a “bare” uniform and cap (with no red badges and star) were handed over to me by the platoon leader. He said to me these words, simple and directive: “Xiao Chen Hong, you put on this.”

I put on the “uniform” and joined in the orderly ranks. We “marched forward” on the street. I suppressed the dreadful welling of tears and let the sense of shame engulf me. I shared in part the pride that marching with the “red” group brought me and reserved the shame that the lack of red symbols on my “army uniform” caused. I wanted then to find a way to stay (because I had to), charting some middle way between the pride and shame. I decided to borrow from a friend (who was from an army family) one pair of red collar badges and a red star insignia. I then stitched them onto “my” military uniform and cap. With this renewed image, I seemed to present myself with a lofty public profile, although almost everyone in the city by then knew who I was and which category of family I belonged to. I had to choose to declare my stance, even if doing so might have placed me at greater risk and left me subject to more severe shame.

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It was indeed courageous for a girl of fifteen to accept such “shame,” with which I learned to internalize the values by finding “a way to stay,” as I stated, “because I had to.” My way to stay was courageous. I did not flee from my “most shameful” moment, but instead stood my ground between pride and shame. It took me even greater courage to do what I had done next: borrowed the red badges and star and stitched them onto “‘my’ military uniform.”

This courage derived from my ability to feel the appropriate amount of shame and to be brave; it is a mean between timidity and rashness in this situation.

### **Conclusion: Educational Efforts in the Mean**

Cultivating the Way is called instruction (Confucius, trans. 2006b, chap. 1.). Cultivation of moral agency through inculcating traits such as self-discipline or self-regulation and courage or bravery calls for educational efforts. The central theme of *The Doctrine of the Mean* is the self-cultivation of human nature, educating people to conscientiously develop their skills in self-cultivation, self-supervision, self-education, and self-perfection. A coherent understanding of the Confucius's and Aristotle's conception of the mean resides in the realm of moral principles, wherein Confucius emphasizes self-cultivation and self-perfection, reaching toward complete sincerity and highest virtue, and Aristotle similarly emphasizes the virtuous state of character represented by the mean, in which good choice making is the peak of moral excellence—the “perfect virtue.” This may point to a general idea of self-discipline and courage as an ethically agentic effort in education, a process of directing learning as well as perfecting it. For education in a broader sense is a process that embraces discipline, self-discipline, cultivation, child rearing, and is not limited to the commonly perceived concepts such as schooling, learning, tutelage, book learning, and so forth. Education *per se*, for Aristotle as well as for Confucius, is a particular way in which we ought to have been brought up from our very youth, “so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education” (*NE*, p. 32).

Thus self-discipline, or self-regulation, or laws as well as rules in the similar sense of discipline, is itself a process of self-learning and self-preparation as well as being an agentic

ethical effort made in the educational process. In this view, self-discipline is a mean that “bids us practice every virtue and forbids us to practice any vice” (*NE*, p. 111). The things that tend to produce virtue taken as a whole in the Aristotelian mean (as a unity of heaven and man), or in the Confucian mean (as a harmony between cosmos and individuals), are those choices and “acts prescribed by the law which have been prescribed with a view of education for the common good” (*NE*, p. 111). In addition, courage is the mean with regard to cowardice and rashness, and also a virtuous state of character with choice. In my case, a Chinese girl, my courage to suffer the public and performative quality of shame that separated me from the larger group was an act of agency—an ability—that required me to make a choice and to act through rational activities (for example, to understand, to reflect, to intend, to overcome, to learn). In order to stand my ground against this public shame, I used my own courage to make a public change—putting the red collar badges and red star insignia on my uniform. This act required a corresponding agency in order to recognize its necessity. My courage enabled me to make an ethical choice that yielded me the honour to act. My action was a courageous attempt to achieve my goal of “living a respected life” despite taking the risk of suffering more shame.

Thus, self-discipline and courage, as discussed in this essay as a mean in education, entail a moral effort to choose and act as a result of our awareness of the possibility of moral struggle and of our commitment both to knowledge and experience as well as to strength and will. This shows that education, as a matter of acquiring moral knowledge (knowing certain actions and attitudes), is learning and preparation acquired in practice and through experience. By being good and by doing good, we carry the mean into our practices and follow the Way (*Dao*) in cultivating our humanity. We thus always do what is natural according to our status

in the world and our circumstances in reality. We emanate from experience and understanding at which we aim and to which we commit ourselves by choice and action. Furthermore, self-discipline as well as courageous actions entail a moderate bearing on the virtue of character in a person right through education as well as through life, with weight, pressure, conflict, desire, and aspiration, as is experienced and exemplified in the monologues presented here.

## Chapter 6. Bearing and Transcending Suffering with Nature and the World

### —A Humanistic Account<sup>42</sup>

#### Foreword: A Roar of Earth!

Oh, Heaven, I'm asking you:  
'Can we human beings exchange with you, one day?'  
You come down, and  
We go up.  
Or, just to turn it around:  
Can some day you be us and we be you?!  
—by the author (2011)

We may have heard a poignant and hopeless voice crying out to Heaven when, on 12 May 2008, Earth shook down thousands of homes and devastated hundreds of thousands of people. It was at 2.48 p.m. (Beijing time), when school children were having classes, that the massive Wenchuan earthquake shattered hundreds of classrooms, in a twinkling! Scenes of countless children buried deep in the wretched cement school buildings and small hands, holding pens and pencils, sticking out of the rubble made sensitive eyes smart with tears. The local people, however, while still shaking and aching in the aftermath, could not help but continue to stumble on the earth...

*The catastrophe this time happened to occur in my home province—Sichuan, China. So I feel a strong affinity with this human condition...*

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<sup>42</sup> This chapter is a slightly revised version of the article previously published in the *Journal of Moral Education*, 40(2), 203-216 (2011 June). This chapter is dedicated to the people in my home province, Sichuan, who endured the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and to all of us who offered them caring, help and support. With a universal spirit, they are moving on together and building a new life and homeland.

Although Nietzsche (1882/2001), through the voice of his madman, once cried out, “God is dead! God remains dead!” (p. 120) still, at this very moment, the begging question—‘Where are you, God?’—persistently calls for the existence of God (or “Heaven” in the Chinese tradition). This is a question that manifestly appraises or devastates our human experience. This is a question for me and, even more, for those whose daughters or sons, mothers or fathers, vanished in the wreckage of the pillars and cement in Sichuan province on that afternoon, after Earth had shaken the land.

Unlike flying creatures, we human beings, as terrestrial mammals with ideological and emotional attachments, cannot escape this death-ridden quake so we cannot gain access to high flight, even though one day Heaven might grant us the grace of “[w]e go up,” for which the crying voice in the poem pleads. Nonetheless, beyond any emotional outburst in facing such a calamity of human history, I want to confront this unavoidable human condition by asking, “Why are we human beings bound to such a fate? What can be done so that human beings have the right to live and live with dignity?” I seem to have asked what cannot be asked, as if asking for Heaven to try to measure the immeasurable (the sky), and to seek to answer what cannot be answered while thinking of the fresh ruins of the earthquake!

But I shall proceed with these burning questions to try to account for human interdependence with Nature and the world. By considering some issues raised by traditional environmental or ecological theorists, I draw upon how the interplay of Nature and humankind bears on people’s attitudes toward reality, naturally, socio-culturally and politically, especially when such interrelatedness is situated in both drastic uncertainties and complexities. Moments such as those experienced during an earthquake condense much of

human anxiety and fear in a far more unpredictable fashion. I shall, instead, depict a promising ethical life of the universe—a life that encompasses the intrinsic relation of humankind to Nature and human society, and a life that symbolises a universal spirit with its realisation residing in humanistic qualities of caring, responsibility and free spirit. I hope to show how, through education—teaching the wisdom of suffering—we human beings can achieve these qualities. I argue that the way people choose to face such a calamity as a devastating earthquake is an ethical act, in the sense that it not only challenges them to make choices confronted by such abject conditions, but also transforms them in their intense involvement with their own ethical existence.

### **Human Puzzlement**

As we are constantly reminded by story tellers, researchers, or theorists as diverse as playwrights, philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, ecologists and geologists, the world in which we are living is “an unfinished project” (Richardson, 2006, p. 284) and an imagined entity. By “an imagined entity”, I mean that we human beings never really know the origin of this universe, although mythologies and religions, Eastern and Western, have offered us diverse enchanting versions. In an extended sense, this world, inclusive of and integral to Earth, people and society, is, in its own right, a dynamic unity, one presenting an image from which humankind can view her instability and unpredictability through the lenses of the past and the present. Nature’s ever-flowing, ever-interactive essence is exhaustively reflected in human history—in ancient Chinese 易经 *Yi jing*

[*I ching*]<sup>43</sup>, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Goethe's *Faust*, as well as in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this particular case of the Sichuan earthquake (and in many other similar quakes), Nature, somehow, may not appear real to us human beings. What seems to be the work of magical force is in fact natural—as in *The Tempest* in the Shakespearean tragicomic sense or the Sichuan earthquake my hometown people experienced. And unfortunately the far more numerous workings of Nature's power before, and (unquestionably) after are arbitrary creations of Earth. These drastic creations tantalise human beings with their bewildering contrasts between dream and reality, imagination and the outer world, as in our imaginary creations of *The Tempest* or *Faust*. The pride of human life and dominance thereof thus crumble beneath Earth's deconstruction of them.

It is then reasonable to ask a historically significant question: have we human beings failed Nature, thus facing Gaia's revenge (as suggested by Lovelock, 2006; Liotta & Shearer, 2006)? Or, are we hopelessly lost between Nature and the human world? Some 'answers' are suggested in the thinking of ecologists and environmentalists who are concerned about anthropogenic environmental problems. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, pioneer of deep ecology, has urged people to pose questions about the Humankind-Nature relationship, about whether human beings stand above and apart from Nature, as its lord and master, or whether human beings (and other species) are part of Nature. Subsequently, for decades, ecophilosophers have questioned the assumption that human beings are at the culmination of

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<sup>43</sup> 易经 *Yi jing* [*I ching*] (2006), also called *The book of changes* is considered the oldest of the Chinese classics. It has been considered a book of fundamental principles by philosophers, politicians, mystics, alchemists, yogins, diviners, sorcerers and more recently by scientists and mathematicians (see Thomas Cleary's translation of *The Taoist I ching*, 1986/2005).



the evolutionary process—as if human beings are masters of Nature. For deep ecologists, this way of thinking could prove to be fatal for the whole living planet. In his intriguing essay, “The historical roots of our ecological crisis,” Lynn White (1967) wrote “Man’s relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature” (p. 1203).

While environmentalists or ecologists strive to preserve and conserve Nature, at the same time, human beings constantly encounter the earthly disruptions whose inevitability and devastation reach beyond their perception and prediction. The meaning of such calamities as experienced by humans invariably goes beyond any evaluation of the cause-effect relationship between Nature and humans that has been attempted by natural or environmental movements, concerned about the destruction (or revenge) of Nature for the depredation wrought by humans.

It is, however, not my intention in this chapter to further deduce certain causal relations between Nature and human beings in order to explain why human beings are destined to suffer these earthly disruptions. Rather, I raise a related and reasonable question: “How do human beings face up to the devastations produced by Earth, or any other forms of suffering caused by natural calamities?” To put it in another way: “How can we human beings survive our own involvement in the aftermath of these catastrophes (e.g. the 2004 South Asia tsunami, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the 2008 Myanmar cyclone, to name but a few)?” (And at the very time I am finishing writing this chapter (June 2011), we are in the wake of Japan’s devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster!)

Certainly, we human beings do not have, at all times, to go through such catastrophes as these; yet, we, as *beings-in-the world*, in Heidegger’s term, have, unavoidably, to cope with

any and all natural or ‘unnatural’ (social and political) calamities, whenever we are forced to. But it would be difficult for us humans to erase the memories in encountering such natural disasters as tsunamis, earthquakes (I shall never forget the scenes of those innocent buried hands that were holding pens and pencils), and such socio-political calamities as the Holocaust and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (during which time I was a child of a persecuted family). Yet it is still easy to dismiss the question of what we bear through our presence in such unavoidable devastation. This brings us to the question of how we continue with our presence in the existing world. Before I ask the question how we human beings can work toward such harmony, I seek to understand what Nature is.

Nature, Lao Zi (in *Dao de jing*, version 2006) said, is “Heaven and Earth”—the universe. Heaven and Earth follow the *Dao* (Way) of spontaneity (i.e., naturalness). This means that all things are going through a natural cycle—the change and replacement of the four seasons, the life and death of human beings, the appearance and disappearance of plants, the alternation of day and night. And I add this: in a more dynamic and severe sense, Heaven and Earth, of course, work through tempests, deluges, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other calamities alike. The *Dao* of Heaven is a symbol of naturalness that lies at the heart of the universe, keeping all things in balance (Wang, 1998). This balance or harmony is characterised by “天道无亲” “*tian dao wu qin*,” namely, ‘The Dao of Heaven has no preference’ (*Lao Zi*, Ch. 79; my translation). Hence, Heaven and Earth have no favourites, treating all things alike.

While Lao Zi held that it was the *Dao* (of naturalness) but not God that was the origin of Nature (Heaven and Earth) or the “mother of the myriad things” (Ch. 1), Western metaphysician Spinoza (1677/2006) viewed God and Nature as identical. Crucial to his thought is his notion of substance that has self-caused and infinite attributes. Spinoza believed that the ‘essence of

God’/Nature is “the eternal and infinite Being” (p. 29)—the infinite, divine substance, comprising all reality. Following these metaphysical ideas about Nature (and/or God), we human beings (and other different finite creatures) are actually by extension the whole of Nature.

If I understand Lao Zi’s *Dao* of Heaven and Spinoza’s self-caused, “in-itself” attribute of Nature, I then understand my earlier question of why we human beings are so bound to such “destiny”. This metaphysical question leads me to pose an ethical question in relation to my earlier query: “What can human beings do so as to live a harmonious life with Nature and to live with dignity?” In doing so, I return to the realm of humanism, whose philosophical notion of humanity emphasises human beings’ capacity for self-realisation through reasoning (rejecting supernatural beings), in order to carry out their duty to promote the welfare of humankind. On such a view, we thus concern ourselves with a godless understanding of human beings and the world, existence and values in the universe.

### The Ethical Life of the Universe

天地浑沌如鸡子	The universe was like an egg—only darkness and chaos,
盘古生其中	<i>Pangu</i> slept in it.
天地开辟	One day Heaven and Earth were split apart:
阳清为天	The light and pure <i>Yang</i> rose to be Heaven
阴浊为地	The heavy and murky <i>Yin</i> sank to be Earth...

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An excerpt from 三五历纪 *Sanwu liji* [*Three five historic records*],<sup>44</sup> my translation.

<sup>44</sup> In the genesis of Chinese tradition, the Daoist author in The Three Kingdoms period, 徐整 Xu Zheng (220-265 AD) told the story of *Pangu* separates Heaven and Earth in the book entitled 三五历纪 *Sanwu liji* [*Three five historic records*].

### ***Humankind—Her Kinship of Caring***

When I was little, I loved to hear the fairy tale of “*Pangu Separates Heaven from Earth*.” The story tells how *Pangu* (盘古), the first living being and the creator of all in Chinese mythology, separated Heaven and Earth, and thus of how we humans came into being under the sky and on the earth. The story goes, as the Chinese verse above reads, that in the beginning nothing existed in the universe except a formless chaos, within which lived *Pangu*. For eighteen thousand years, this chaos began to coalesce into a cosmic egg, within which two opposed energies (or *qi*) of *Yin* and *Yang* became balanced. And one day, the universe split and *Pangu* emerged from the egg, as he woke up. With this splitting, clear *Yang* (阳清) became Heaven (天 *Tian*), and murky *Yin* (阴浊) turned into Earth called *Di* (地). The story continues: *Pangu* took on the task of creating the world. So he first separated *Yin* energy from *Yang* energy with a swing of his giant axe and so he created *Tian* [Heaven] and *Di* [Earth]. Then, to keep them separated, he stood between Heaven and Earth and pushed up Heaven. This task took another eighteen thousand years; with each day Heaven grew ten feet higher, Earth ten feet wider, and *Pangu* ten feet taller.

*Pangu* thus separated Heaven from Earth. After another eighteen thousand years had elapsed *Pangu* stopped work to rest. His breath dispersed and became the wind; his voice turned into thunder. His left eye was the sun and right eye the moon. His body was shaped into the mountains and hills of the world. His blood formed rivers; his muscles configured fertile lands. The stars and Milky Way were his facial hair; the bushes and forests were his fur. All valuable minerals came from his bones and sacred diamonds were formed by his bone marrow. When *Pangu* perspired his sweat fell as rain. This was how *Pangu* created the

natural world. And finally, the fleas on his fur, dispersed by the wind, became human beings all over the world.

Herein lies the unity of *Tian* [Heaven], *Di* [Earth] and *Ren* [People]. The vital force of humankind arises from that of Heaven and Earth, between clear *Yang* and murky *Yin*, with a dwelling between the vastness of *Tian* and the thickness of *Di*. Between *Tian* and *Di* lies *Ren*. The importance of this conjunction is embodied by widely accepted basic thinking in the Chinese tradition, 天时, 地利, 人和 *Tianshi*, *Dili*, *Renhe*: the basis of success, and, more importantly, for human existence, is the harmony of good timing, geographical convenience and good human relations. However, no matter how different the genesis of humankind depicted in Chinese mythology is from that of the Western traditions, there is at least one similarity: human beings are born relational, dwelling between Heaven and Earth. However separate and distinct from Nature, human beings are part of and within the whole, implicated in its balance and harmony.

On this metaphysical view of Nature, the dwelling of human beings between Heaven and Earth is appropriately described in Heidegger's *Building dwelling thinking* (1977),

But "on the earth" already means "under the sky." Both of these *also* mean "remaining before the divinities" and include a "belonging to men's being with one another." By a *primal* oneness the four—earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one. (p. 327, emphasis in original)

Thus, we humans are inseparable from the Other: the Earth, the world; we are in a

bound relation, which grants meaning for us only because “‘we are’ it” (Evernden, 1993, p. 81). We are inseparable from the world, as we are the world, for we as mortals dwell in the way we “preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 328). We are reaching the Daoist (Lao Zi’s) and Confucian depiction of the highest form of spiritual life that results from the state of oneness between Heaven and Humans (天人合一 *tian ren he yi*) and Heidegger’s “*primal oneness [of] the four*” (p. 327). We may try to cooperate with Heaven, and Earth, our own mortal beings and the “noosphere” (conscious-experience) world (Zimmerman, 2004, p. 9). We may, as ecologists, naturalists and environmentalists strive to preserve mountains, rivers, plants, minerals in order to overcome what ecologists call ecological crises. Hence, we are related to, yet at the same time, distinct from Heaven and Earth, and the world that we experience is an unfinished process—ever-changing and ever-shifting. As such, a person is both singular and plural in the sense that s/he is neither an individual without the group nor an entity without the whole. Rather, a person is an organic part that is integral to the embodiment of family, group, community, society and, ultimately, Earth and the world.

When turning to a phenomenological description of beings—either human beings or non-human beings, Heidegger (1953/1996) saw them first as immersed in the world, before being able to be thought of as separate subjects or isolated egos. Therefore, he called human beings in this regard, *Dasein*, meaning, “being there,” similarly, “being-in-the-world.” In passing over the traditional philosophical categories of subject and object (people and Nature in this sense), Heidegger described human existence as *being there*—under the sky and on the earth. Going forward with this notion, we come to understand that Heidegger spoke of *Dasein* in the sense of “caring” as necessary for our being-in-the-world. This I view as a

humanistic ethics of existence, an ethics that views existence as relational *being-in-the-world*, caring and being cared for.

### ***Unification—A Sense of Responsibility***

The Dao of Heaven and Earth is openness and  
tranquillity; when openness and tranquillity are within  
oneself, this means Heaven and Earth are within oneself.

*(The book of balance and harmony, see Cleary, trans., 1989/2003, p.15)*<sup>45</sup>

Ethics is essentially concerned with how human beings choose to live on the earth. The renowned ecologist Aldo Leopold (1949/2001) has extended the meaning of ethics:

An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation. (p. 168)

Taking Leopold's position further, I posit that this view of co-operative mechanisms between individuals and groups to some extent corresponds with one formulation of the Dao:

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<sup>45</sup> *The book of balance and harmony, a Taoist handbook*, is a Daoist (Taoist) classic (中和集 *Zhong he ji*), translated by Thomas Cleary (1989/2003), which contains essays, conversations, poetry and songs about the secrets of Daoism, teaching how to live a centred and orderly life. (Some words of Cleary's translation cited in the text are changed.)

the balanced unification of Heaven and Earth within humanity. The Daoist teaching of ‘openness’ and ‘tranquillity’, embodies human freedom from preoccupation and agitation. Openness and tranquillity in 易经 *Yi jing* [*I ching*] are qualities that allow humanity to deal adaptively and effectively with change. Take the example of changes brought to human beings by natural calamities: wherein lies the ethical life human beings have to choose to live in the face of trying situations in relation to others.

One instance among many catastrophic experiences during the Sichuan earthquake exemplifies a moment that calls for ethical decisions—responsive to and responsible for such abject circumstances—that people, young and old, have to make. Instead of following the instinct to escape from death, a school teacher chose to arch his back to shield as many of his pupils as possible from the collapsing classroom building. Under his strong yet flesh-made shield, four young lives were saved. Afterwards, when the innocent voices of the pupils whose lives the young teacher saved echoed one another, our sad hearts shed tears for this young man’s commendable spirit of high morality. “I heard Teacher cry out: ‘Come! Come to me! Quickly!’” “Teacher told us ‘Stay! Don’t move!’,” another pupil cut in, “I just squatted under Teacher and heard thundering noises!” “Suddenly, I felt Teacher laid heavily on my head, and I no longer heard his voice...” sobbed this child. “Teacher saved our lives...!”

Such swift decision-making by this admirable teacher, choosing between his life and death, is not only moral but also a manifestation of what is intrinsic in humanity, as Leopold (1949/2001) claims, “[e]thics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making” (p. 168). For Leopold, ethics deals mainly with the relation among individuals and/or between individuals and communities, their convergence and divergence in relation to eco-system. On



this view, we may assert that between Earth and Heaven, between individuals and society lies an ethical life—a unified responsibility—in a relation that is neither one without the other, nor the other without one. This readily entails a reciprocal responsiveness to any human conditions wherein reside the necessary responsibilities of individuals as part of the whole. As is expressed in their words, these saved young lives may have also learned to appreciate life that can be shared as a continuum in the community and to find ways to face such radical human conditions.

To further understand this bounded relation of responsibility, both ecologically and philosophically, I turn to Aristotle's assertion that man's "form" comprises a soul, which has a plant-like part, an animal part, and a rational part. The ensuing question Aristotle asked is, "How should we live? What is required to live a good life?" For him, the ultimate goal for human beings is to pursue *eudaimonia* (a word usually translated as "happiness"), which is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (see Aristotle's *The Nicomachean ethics*, trans. 1998). In Aristotle's emphasis on moral reasoning (*phronesis*, or practical wisdom), a human being can only achieve happiness by using all of his or her abilities and capabilities. If we accept Aristotle's assertion about achieving happiness, we need to exercise our practical wisdom particularly in circumstances when we have to choose a way of living in the face of, or in the aftermath of drastic uncertainties. This encompasses choosing between life and death, confronting fear and pain. This is to say ethical decisions are unavoidable. The decisions the young school teacher made in the very moment of the earthquake manifested humanistic responsibility, in not only responding to the demands of the situation, there and then, but also in self-realisation with the Other through reasoned (not supernatural or godly) capacity. This

humanistic responsibility, following Aristotelian virtue ethics, embodies both moral and intellectual (moral reasoning) virtues, and promotes the well-being of Nature and humanity.

### ***Harmony—A Universal Spirit***

Across the East and the West, from Hellenic to modern times, philosophers and educators, among many others (doctors, nurses, carers, etc.), work relentlessly to discover how humankind should best live and die. This is central to ethical concerns. Just as Aristotelian ethics is concerned with the study of moral conduct for living a good life so this is also central to the concerns of Socrates, Lao Zi and Confucius. For Confucius, it is 仁 *ren* or 仁义 *ren yi* [the virtue of love or benevolence]—an act resulting from proper moral integrity—that accords with the genuine benevolence that consists of the cultivation of a personal morality always aiming to benefit others. The young teacher's moral conduct symbolises the essence of the ethics of Confucianism (and Aristotle's virtue of *phronesis*). At the end of *The Analects* Confucius (version 2006a) said, “He who does not understand the will of Heaven cannot be a gentleman [being benevolent]...” (20:3, p. 159, my translation). In Confucian doctrine, the will of Heaven, or “destiny,” governed the unalterable, which therefore had to do with things such as fate, mortality, and so forth. It is only in our time that ethics has more or less become reduced to a set of rules, say, for living without treading on other people's toes.

Aristotle rejected all forms of imbalance and advocated a rule of living—the “Golden Mean,” which corresponds with the Confucian (version 2006b) “Doctrine of the Mean.” On this view, extremes are an expression of a warped way of life. Such thinking

considers the life of the universe as a process, in which the essence or form of things stands in a relation between the universal and the particular, and which is presented in the realisation of each interdependent part of an existential order. In this order a person is a member of a social group of interdependent parts.

Further, on this view, the essence of the mean that both Confucius and Aristotle advocated is manifest in the unification of Heaven, Earth and human beings. In this unified, balanced and harmonious entity, human beings as mortals “under the sky” and “on the earth,” are already in the oneness. To recall Heidegger, human beings are just “being there,” immersed and at the same time are ‘in-the-world.’ This can also apply to the view of the societal world I am describing here, because, as Aristotle said in *Politics*, man is by nature a “political animal” (2003, p. 324). Without a society around us, we are not real human beings. Moreover, Aristotle proposed that the highest form of fellowship is only to be found in the state. And the Golden Mean, embodying a sense of balance and harmony, will integrate human beings with both the natural world and the societal world.

In an attempt to depict a harmony of Nature and humankind, I feel compelled to return to ecological ethics. If Leopold is correct in his assertion, “[T]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (1949/2001, p. 168), then it may seem right to say that there is no ethical intention behind the work of Nature in its activities including earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones. It also seems that the relation between Nature and human beings, especially in terms of our attitude toward Nature, has accordingly changed. With these circumstances that Nature has granted to human beings, along came our distrust of life and reality and the change of values that shifts human worldviews and shatters confidence—sometimes or

many times—like the general sentiment the people of my hometown experienced during and after the earthquake. In such circumstances we realise such change has occurred and want to know in what way we are changed, to what extent, and in what direction—better or worse? Therefore, the voice of harmony in the universe, one of the key ethical concepts, sounds discordant in this particular context of an aftermath. Aspiring to harmony is not, as it were, a merely modern aspiration. Nor is it exclusive to an Eastern ideology of the cosmos-universe unification.

The ancient Greek Pythagoras and his followers taught that the universe exhibits harmonies that can be mathematically described. Pythagoras maintained that there should exist a consonance between a mathematically conceived heavenly harmony and the human soul. This metaphysical view embodies an ethical imperative which calls for cultivation of individual's soul so that it would somehow come to resemble the harmony of the universe (Kahn, 2001). On this view, the microcosmic harmony of the self was to imitate the macrocosmic harmony of the universe. Plato, deeply influenced by the Pythagorean teaching, viewed the universe as harmonious, and *The republic of Plato* (Plato, trans. 1945) and *Timaieus* (Plato, trans. 2003) in particular demonstrate the pre-eminence of unity and harmony among his ethical and political ideals.

Furthermore in linking both Lao Zi's and Spinoza's ideas of the universe, every part of Nature agrees with the whole and is associated with all other parts, because Nature is that which is within itself and Heaven and Earth are within oneself. Nonetheless, according to both philosophers, we human beings are unable to experience more than our immediate surroundings in the context of the whole of the universe. What looks evil in part must not be so in the whole.

That may sound reassuring to those experiencing events such as earthquakes and other natural disasters.

Harmony can thus carry dual functions in ethical discourse in relation to the universe, the interdependent parts of the whole and the independent whole of parts. It can be something we aspire to, or it can be something that is already there. This discourse communicates a universal ethical and religious understanding of the world, as opposed to one that pertains only to a vision of one-sidedness. Rather, it is imperative to envision a universe as a unity of interdependent parts intertwined differentially in a bound relation. This vision and a concomitant attitude toward human beings themselves, Earth and the world become ethical, once such a view has positioned human beings to react to reality to the extent that literature has captured through romance or tragicomedy—in the sense of unrealistic visions of existence, or through satire or tragedy—in the sense of realistic perception. Here I recall what Goethe described in *Faust*'s romantic wish to commune with Nature, and Shakespeare's conjured reality in his comedy *The Tempest*.

It is thus my intention in this section of the chapter to depict a harmony—a universal or world spirit. This spirit embodies two aspects: the actual world wherein human beings may encounter such phenomena as earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, deluges, pain, terrors. The other aspect is the subjective attitudes of human beings towards such things and in relation to Nature and society. Our understanding of spirit allows us to exemplify this understanding within the structure of a cosmic order. This universal spirit is not a God-like entity; it does not restrict the acts of creation to gods or poets, nor determine the progress of human history from above. Rather, it suggests a subjective spirit that human beings possess for making improvements in facing human conditions of radical change or deviation.

Leopold wrote, “Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets, but humbler folks may circumvent this restriction if they know how” (1949/2001, p.143). Endorsing this view, I wish to further stress that the act of creation should be neither defined by nor delimited to gods or poets. “Humbler folks,” or ordinary human beings, can also engage in acts of creation: they create subjective worlds, natural and societal, that may resemble or mirror the harmony of the cosmic unity. This way, the relation may appear to be harmonious, or otherwise, of course. This is how the universe, the human world, or Nature is reflected in the minds of Sichuan people who are still going through the aftermath of the devastating earthquake.

Even if some recurring examples of human-Nature and individual-societal disharmony are so compelling that human beings ceaselessly think, question, doubt or despair, we still do not feel we should abandon our desire to live. Instead, I would say that there exists an absolute spirit among those uncertainties and unpredictabilities that we hold together because, to refer to Heidegger’s expression once again, we human beings as mortal beings are “dwelling” within a unified entity—“under the sky,” “on the earth,” which also means, “remaining before divinities”—sharing a common spirit and moving toward a common aim. This aim is to live and to continue to live, regardless.

### **Teaching Suffering for Humanistic Transcendence**

Humankind’s vocation thus consists in a humanistic response to a “call” which demands our attention, on our part, of “presencing” with Nature and in the world, to the extremes of life experience, and the limits of reality. It therefore becomes important to know

what is meant by these extremes of experience, whether from imagined situations, such as to be found in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Goethe's *Faust*, from personal experience in losing one's loved ones in an earthquake, or from social and political events of our own times—the world's wars, the global economic crises. All this is hardly devoid of pain and suffering that, at one and the same time, afflicts us human beings and calls, insistently, for our commitment to continue to live.

Suffering thus encompasses the potential price for a meaningful life—indeed, the meaningfulness of life for the four young survivors in the Sichuan earthquake is epitomised at the price of their young teacher's life. Their experience of suffering and of their teacher's sacrifice represents a life force that symbolises a universal spirit, one that is humanistic. This both requires and exemplifies self-realisation, consisting of humanistic aspects of, say, caring and responsibility.

To recognise and acknowledge suffering, as well as happiness, readily brings us to moral education. The difference between these two human conditions lies in the fact that, whereas happiness is one of the states that education aims to bring about, suffering, which violates the intrinsic nature of happiness, can be viewed as evil or, at least, something to be avoided. But how and why is it right to bring suffering into schooling or the classroom? How should we ask students to face suffering, out of which they may make meaning? I might be making too great a demand in asking to bring the topic of suffering to schools, or to explore the nature of suffering as part of the curriculum. But, conversely, caring ethics (Noddings, 1984, 2003)—which is indeed, quintessentially important for moral education—is advocated in an educational setting. However, my point is that there is a need to restate the educational implication of suffering. It is imperative to note here that conceptualising education as living

and learning to bear suffering does not aim to oppose those who strive to achieve a state of happiness, nor to judge those who choose not to think about wretched or abject human conditions. Rather, teaching suffering explores humanistic worldviews, which shape people's everyday choices in the face of drastic change in their ways of living. These worldviews are thus deeply embedded in uncertainty and complexity intertwined with Nature and the societal world. This is an exercise that allows children to enter into the past and move to the future from the present, as their choices in their own right, to some extent, are shaped by ways of understanding the world by past historical conditions.

Let me pause here to mention two instances from the Sichuan earthquake. With her whole family buried under the wreckage during the earthquake, all of a sudden a little girl is thrown into facing a completely strange and yet imposed landscape of life. This inescapably forces her, at a young age, to confront and reconcile the radical and drastic change for her life that still has to go on, individually, socially, economically, and ecologically. Another child, a three-year-old boy, was buried under the shattered buildings in the earthquake. When rescued and given the hope of living, the boy 'saluted' the stretcher-bearing soldiers carrying him away from the wreckage. The gesture of this three-year-old (later known as the "saluting boy") moved us all to tears. The little boy and the little girl, and others forced to face death and life, undoubtedly learned about the extremes of painful and dreadful experience—a real world, in which they are dwelling. To be sure, these young beings acquired a human moral reasoning (recall what the four children said about their young teacher who saved their lives). This is, I would argue, what Aristotle described as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This tragic experience of life teaches these young people what it means to suffer, and, most of all, what it means to live and be happy. The meaning of happiness is made real for them under



the contingent human conditions they have gone through. Such acquired practical wisdom is the wisdom of suffering, or what Gabriel Marcel (1973/1985) terms “tragic wisdom.”

It is this contingency of suffering in life that urges us to consider a necessary way of grappling with human afflictions, one that is more educative than contingent. My point is that teaching suffering does not mean to advocate or create suffering situations in the classroom—this would certainly go against our agenda—nor to teach the young to mechanically take on pain and suffering, for example, to simply stay in the midst of an earthquake and suffer in order to learn the value of suffering. Teaching suffering or teaching the practical wisdom of suffering, which the young Chinese earthquake survivors have acquired through their life-death experience, is in fact an interactive process of human transcendence—an action of exercising our moral reasoning toward one of the unavoidable human conditions, which contributes in part to the entirety of human experience. For such experience, together with happiness, is intimately concerned with the way we view ourselves, the reality we are born from or with, and our function and meaning in this world, and this provides us with unique avenues to personal exploration and self-realisation.

I believe that this is an important level of understanding which places emphasis on philosophical and ecological relations to education in that our being here and experiencing of the conflicting sides of a balanced whole is a point of departure for a different educational discourse. I argue that this will allow us to educate humanistically, in a way that may lead us to empower inwardly rather than outwardly, and to teach, while cognisant of the relationship of our humanity to Nature and to social relations, between the apparent and the hidden, the predictable and the unpredictable, ultimately the ability to face immanent death and the

courage to live on. This experiencing or presencing between the extremes, the joyful and the dreadful, the exalting and the devastating, life and death, can empower one to make ethical decisions. Thus, I hope to juxtapose this form of educational empowerment, which I shall call living and learning to bear suffering, with formal thinking and theorising about its relevance to public education which primarily aims to teach how to achieve happiness, while such an aim may, even if unintentionally, have other outcomes.

### **Afterword: The Life of Humankind**

To remain intact, be crooked,  
To become straight, be bent,  
To become full, be hollow,  
To be ragged is yet to be renewed.

*(Lao Zi/Dao de jing, Chapter 22, 2006, p. 50, my translation)*

The teaching of Daoism implicates an inherent relation between two tensions, or conflicts that condition and balance one another. It is from the paradoxical reciprocity of this metaphysical worldview that I present a humanistic account of living with and transcending suffering.

While I feel grief for the “roar” of Earth, I cherish a hope that obliges us to mount the lofty height of humanity at every turning point in life that may foster a spirit on the educational front: a free spirit that may allow us to overcome any imposition and devastation, and eventually, overcome ourselves in terms of our suffering, wherein the state of happiness inheres.

## Epilogue: A Prospect

### The Road Ever Taken

#### I

We fashion our own anguish and glory:  
Our paths are the redeemable evocations—  
Of the past, always in departing from arriving.  
With hopes we will the end before the feet take command,  
And the course of travels, into which we, too, venture.  
In strength we tread the untrodden boulders;  
And shall still trudge the winding trails;  
With an audacious step's measure  
We stroll, rather, on yon muddy road concealed.  
In the temptation of our temerity, and—  
The yearning of our yielding;  
Much there is pain for our feet to gain.

#### II

In the labyrinth of our journeying,  
When somas were pained and,  
Somas never ceased to be pained and heartened;  
Sense were making hearty voices of reflecting,  
From bad to good, and from good to better.  
Then, we shall not distain nor abandon them: the trodden trails,  
Upon which we might have tilted our horizons.  
But the holding onto the thing near,  
In the sphere of our sorrow and fear;  
The drudges and toilers we are, rather let us be:  
From toddlers to strollers, and from walkers to gallopers,

But ever not to life's waifs and strays!

### III

Yet the wound and sore were not in vain at all.  
The ground we trod lifts the hearts, the hearts of ours.  
And the Heavens reject not:  
Our hopes for the hopes—  
Within us powers emerge from persisting hopes.  
Roads may curve and bend,  
Meandering in turns and twists;  
Hopes, though dear, may be dreamers and deceivers,  
Dreamt through the timid by the mind of the bold.  
And hopes too often are akin to despairs.  
When our tired hopes, vainly breaking,  
Despairs can necessarily be fears.

### IV

But the road ever taken shall never faint nor fail,  
Though no longer as an easy saunter;  
Traces and trails have been they shall remain,  
To the past of the new road's worth;  
For each step forward is a hope that are borne in hopes  
Of which, at least, one gleams and glows.  
We are wanderers often in wonder,  
Facing the oft-invoked death,  
Further forward and far backward,  
Through the roads crosses and blocks making.  
The bumps and slopes make us stumble,  
But we must stumble to continue with them.

—by the author (2011)

## **A Cross-Road United**

Envisioning the future path of our research, we must ask ourselves again: How can our contemporary education embrace suffering and pain of human experience and how should we orient our education toward this kind of teaching? In achieving these goals, we must be alert that certain initiatives need to be taken in the ordinariness of our life and in the everydayness of curricular and pedagogical practices of suffering so that suffering may not become detrimental in our practices, hence not contrary to our educational aims. The first and foremost thing we need to do is to ensure sensitive and vicarious space (venues), wherein while we are open to embrace the stories and the lives of suffering, we must also create the other side of humanity: our empathy, our compassion, and our caring. This is the interaction where we unite care ethics and suffering ethics in both our ordinary and educational lives.

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