Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Vol. 38 (August 2022): 153-174
DOI: 10.22916/jcpc.2022..38.153

Causa Sui, the Supreme Polarity, and Moral Responsibility: *How to Understand the Concept of a Person in Neo-Confucian Discourse*

Chan Lee*

Abstract

This paper begins to examine different interpretations of *causa sui* as the key notion used by Strawson to argue for the impossibility of ultimate moral responsibility. Descartes' and Spinoza's interpretations are representative in understanding the notion of *causa sui.* Strawson is, I think, on the side of Descartes. If *causa sui* can be interpreted differently from the way in which Strawson did, the idea of moral responsibility would change. I shall here examine Spinoza's notion of *causa sui*, which is an alternative approach to Strawson's, for leading to the possibility of moral responsibility. The Chinese concept of the Supreme Polarity (*taiji*) can be interpreted as a foundation of self-determination when philosophically comparing it with Spinoza's idea of *causa sui*, which means an immanent and efficient cause. In the Chinese context, the ontological account of an agent explains how and why persons actively participate in the ordering of the world in the Confucian way of life. Based upon this, I will attempt to examine the idea of moral responsibility with the notion of taking responsibility for oneself or, as I will call it, "self-assignment", and consider how the role a person plays might contribute to understanding the relationship between free will and moral responsibility. In other words, the ontological claim that the unitary principle of Heaven-and-Earth is innately immanent in each person seems to endorse the possibility of ultimate responsibility even though the teleological commitment to making the world better implies the absence of free will. This is one of the alternative ways that we can take moral responsibility without free will.

Keywords: *causa sui*, supreme polarity, free will, moral responsibility, self-assignment

* Chan Lee is Associate Professor in the Division of Humanities at Hallym University. E-mail: chanleee@gmail.com

I. Introduction: A Critical Approach to Strawson's Basic Argument

Galen Strawson's Basic Argument is one of the representative cases that takes an ontological analysis for proving "the impossibility of ultimate moral responsibility." He tries to argue that no agent can take true moral responsibility and, "according to the Basic Argument, it makes no difference whether determinism is true or false" (Strawson 2008b, 319).[1] In order to prove his claim, Strawson uses the concept of *causa sui*, which implies a self-sufficiency of causality, in understanding a free agent in terms of an ultimate state. Strawson defines free agents in terms of whether one is capable of being "truly or ultimately responsible for one's action" (2008b, 312). His argument prompts me to examine the key notion of *causa sui* and rethink what "the ultimate" means. This is because all arguments are changeable depending on how key words are defined. The debate on whether free will is compatible with determinism also has many faces because it depends not only on how the key concepts are understood, but also within what disciplines they are discussed.[2] For example, Spinoza (1992) sharply distinguishes freedom from free will, that is, he argues for the possibility of human freedom while denying free will.[3] Thus, he can be considered either a compatibilist or an incompatibilist depending on which of these views one chooses to highlight. Furthermore, the issue of compatibility leads us to choose different philosophical approaches to the analysis of the debate. Most arguments for incompatibilism are based on the metaphysical framework of a deterministic universe that does not allow any contingent events out of a causal sequence. Meanwhile, compatibilists pay attention to the issues of philosophical anthropology

1 It is noteworthy that he added "Ultimate" to the title of the paper when revising it in 1994.

2 Some neuroscientists like Benjamin Libet and John-Dylan Haynes believe that they prove through experiments that our conscious self does not initiate behavior, from which they conclude that free will as we normally understand it is an illusion (Charité 2016).

3 See Part I Definition 7, Part II p. 48, and Part III Definition 2. The other cases can be found in Frankfurt (1971). He analyzes the concept of a person via the freedom of the will. According to him, freedom in general should be conceived differently from the freedom of the will because of second-order desires (1971, 14).

such as the nature of human agents in relation to desires, emotions, moral responsibility, and the concept of a person, and so on. (See Frankfurt 1971 and Strawson 1962). What about Strawson's stance? Precisely speaking, he seems to be uninvolved with the debate on compatibility between free will and determinism because he insists that ordinary finite persons are not truly responsible for their actions and, according to him, it has nothing to do with "whether determinism is true or false" (Strawson 2008b, 319). Of course, it can be said that he argues for a kind of incompatibilism because of the impossibility of ultimate moral responsibility, which means the absence of free will.

In order for Strawson's Basic Argument to be convincing, I think, the notion of *causa sui* should be explained more clearly. *Causa sui* can be interpreted in more than two ways. It has already been interpreted from different perspectives by Plotinus, Descartes, and Spinoza.[4] However, Strawson did not explicitly clarify what kind of *causa sui* is used for his argument. The idea of moral responsibility would change if *causa sui* is interpreted differently from the way in which Strawson did. In this vein, the expression of "*ultimate* or *true*" responsibility needs also to be noteworthy. Why does Strawson add such an adjective in front of responsibility? What does the *ultimate* mean in understanding moral responsibility in relation to the idea of freedom? It seems to imply that there are no preceding conditions to support what one does. In other words, the reason Strawson adds "ultimate" in front of "moral responsibility" seems to have something to do with the way in which he understands *causa sui*. Thus, I shall examine Spinoza's notion of *causa sui*, which is different from Strawson's, for leading to the possibility of moral responsibility.

How can we properly reconstruct the debate on free will and moral responsibility in different philosophical traditions like Chinese or Buddhist thought?[5] Unlike in the Western philosophical tradition, as Kai

4 In the history of Western philosophy, especially from Plotinus through Eckhart to Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, the concept of *causa sui* has been multifariously interpreted in terms of theological and ontological perspectives. Refer to Summerell (2002). In short, Strawson's account of *causa sui* is not the only way to understand it.

5 There has also been no problem of free will in traditional Buddhist thought. For this, see Gowans (2017).

Marchal and Christian Helmut Wenzel argue, "the problem (of free will) seems to be absent in Chinese thought" (2017, 374). But this absence does not necessarily imply that there has been no conception of moral responsibility, which is known to have free will as a necessary condition. In the mind of the Chinese thinkers,[6] rather, the absence can imply that the conception of free will[7] has been represented through different discourses of socio-cultural agenda in other philosophical contexts. For example, awareness of moral responsibility has had a long history of Confucian literati participating in making the world better even though the idea of free will has not been elaborately developed in the East Asian intellectual tradition. In order to argue for compatibility between free will and determinism, on the other hand, some contemporary philosophers take a bypass to prove matters of moral responsibility. If it makes sense, how can we explain the absence of free will in the Confucian tradition emphasizing on moral responsibility? This problem is likely derived from a different way of understanding the ontological relationship between human beings and the world.

In this paper, I will first analyze the concept of *causa sui*, which Strawson considers as the core notion in arguing for "the impossibility of moral responsibility." I contend that the concept of *causa sui* can be interpreted as the ontological ground for responsibility in Neo-Confucian thought. In other words, I argue, from a kind of compatibilist perspective, that there is an immanent basis of human actions, which urges one to take moral responsibility, and it makes no difference whether free will is illusion or not. Then, I investigate the concept of the Supreme Polarity (*taiji* 太極) and examine why it became controversial among later Confucian interpreters. In the second part, I show that the concept of Supreme Polarity plays a crucial role in considering a person to be a responsible agent actively participating in making the world better. The final part will attempt to examine the idea of moral responsibility with the notion of taking responsibility for oneself or, as

6 Bryan Van Norden rhetorically asks, "Do speakers of contemporary Chinese not have the concept of 'million' because they have to use a phrase to express it rather than one lexical item (*baiwan* 百萬, literally 'a hundred ten-thousands')?" (2007, 23).

7 According to Hoefer (2016), "Determinism has been given various, usually imprecise definitions."

I will call it, "self-assignment" (*ziren* 自任), and consider how the role a person plays might contribute to understanding the relationship between free will and moral responsibility.

II. The Supreme Polarity (*Taiji*) as the Chinese Version of *Causa Sui*?

A. Strawson, Descartes, and Spinoza on *Causa Sui*

Galen Strawson's Basic Argument is an attempt to prove "that we cannot be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions" (2008b, 319). His Basic Argument is as follows:

(1) Interested in free action, we are particularly interested in actions that are performed for a reason (as opposed to 'reflex' actions or mindlessly habitual actions).
(2) When one acts for a reason, what one does is a function of how one is, mentally speaking. (It is also a function of one's height, one's strength, one's place and time, and so on. But the mental factors are crucial when moral responsibility is in question.)
(3) So, if one is to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking—at least in certain respects.
(4) But to be truly responsible for how one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must have brought it about that one is the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects. And it is not merely that one must have caused oneself to be the way one is, mentally speaking. One must have consciously and explicitly chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, and one must have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way.
(5) But one cannot really be said to choose, in a conscious, reasoned, fashion, to be the way one is mentally speaking, in any respect at all, unless one already exists, mentally speaking, already equipped with some principles of choice, 'P1'—preferences, values, pro-attitudes, ideals—in the light of which one chooses how to be.
(6) But then to be truly responsible, on account of having chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, one must be

truly responsible for one's having the principles of choice P1 in the light of which one chose how to be.

(7) But for this to be so one must have chosen P1, in a reasoned, conscious, intentional fashion.

(8) But for this, i.e. (7), to be so one must already have had some principles of choice P2, in the light of which one chose P1.

(9) And so on. Here we are setting out on a regress that we cannot stop. True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice.

(10) So true moral responsibility is impossible, because it requires true self-determination, as noted in (3).

His argument assumes that in order for agents to be truly morally responsible for their actions, they must be truly responsible for their reasons for performing the actions. According to Strawson, the reasons for choice are influenced by preceding reasons or conditions, which are determined by results of "heredity and early experience" that the agents themselves have already had. For example, the reason I choose what I do could be further grounded in my dispositions and these have already been influenced or formed by "heredity" or "early experience." In this vein, he argues that "true self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice."[8] In short, his Basic Argument heavily relies on the notion of *causa sui*: "(1) Nothing can be *causa sui*—nothing can be the cause of itself; (2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects; (3) Therefore, nothing can be truly morally responsible" (Strawson 2008b, 319).

Strawson does not provide any detailed account of what the *causa sui* he refers to is, even though this concept was controversial in shedding light on the existence of God in the age of Descartes and Spinoza. According to Strawson's quotation from Nietzsche, "The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far," which is akin to "Baron Munchausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness" (Strawson 2008b, 326).

8 See Premise (9) of Strawson's Basic Argument quoted above.

Nietzsche's comment on *causa sui* is an extremely negative criticism of it not only as the absurd, but also as the oxymoronic. Heidegger also claims that "metaphysics is theology in that it thinks Being as the highest ground above all beings, ultimately as the ground of itself, *causa sui*, which is the metaphysical concept of God" (Heidegger 1969, 15). According to Tae-won Jin (2006, 142), Heidegger argues that the idea of *causa sui* is a self-contradictory concept at which metaphysics arrives in explaining the relation of Being and beings. Then, is Strawson relying on an oxymoronic concept to argue for the impossibility of moral responsibility?

Strawson seems to implicitly admit that *causa sui* is "allowed to belong unintelligibly to God" (2008b, 326).[9] Such a conditional commitment has its origin in Descartes' proof of the existence of God. By the name God, Descartes says that he understands an infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful substance, but he does "not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself" (Descartes 1984, 32).[10] Based upon this remark, Strawson seems to argue that *causa sui* cannot be possessed by finite humans even if "it (causal aseity) is allowed to belong unintelligibly to God."[11] Furthermore, Descartes says that "I do readily admit that there can exist something which possesses such great and inexhaustible power that it never required the assistance of anything else in order to exist in the first place, and does not now require any assistance for its preservation, so that it is, in a certain way, its own cause; and I understand God to be such a being" (CSM II 78). According to Yitzhak Melamed (2021, 118), these sentences are a solid evidence of Descartes assertion that "the only alternative to self-causation is an infinite regression of causes."[12] For example, we need to look at (5)-(9) to figure

9 Strawson, paraphrasing the Basic Argument to prove the impossibility of U-freedom in his other essay "Free Agents," has explicitly claimed that *causa sui* can only belong to God. Refer to Strawson (2008a, 359).

10 When quoting Descartes hereafter, I will use CSM II in the body of my paper.

11 Otherwise, we can, at least, say that Strawson is implicitly influenced by the Cartesian idea of *causa sui.*

12 For more detailed account of Descartes' *causa sui*, see Melamed (2021, especially 117-20).

out the conceptualization of *causa sui* implied by Strawson. First, it can be regarded as an efficient cause given that an effect is produced by some principles of choice. Second, it is supposed to have had a temporal sequence, which means P2 is prior to P1. Finally, it must be either first cause or unmoved mover, which refers to God if the *causa sui* properly matches what Strawson says about true self-determination. In short, Strawson's account of *causa sui* is akin to the Cartesian understanding of it for proving the existence of God, even though he seems to sit on the fence between Descartes and Nietzsche.

We can see that there are at least two ways of understanding *causa sui*: self-contradiction and causal aseity as the attribute of God. How then does Spinoza interpret it in a different way? In the very first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines *causa sui* as follows: "By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing" (E1Def.1[13]). In fact, this definition is not different from Descartes' proof of the existence of God in his *Fifth Meditation* (CSM II 46).[14] What is the difference between Spinoza and Descartes? Even though this definition is placed in the first line of Part I "Concerning God" in the *Ethics*, according to Jin (2006, 158), it has nothing to do with the proof of the existence of God in the philosophy of Spinoza.[15] In fact, Spinoza fully understands the conundrum of Descartes' *causa sui*. To Descartes, *causa sui* is a concept coined by the existence of God having the inexhaustible power that "he never required any assistance of anything in order to exist, and does not now require any assistance for his preservation, so that he is in a sense his own cause" (CSM II 165). How should we understand what the cause is if God is his own cause, but it "cannot be taken to mean an efficient cause"? The reason is because efficient cause has been considered something external. If we regard *causa sui* as the efficient cause of God,

13 Meaning *Ethics* Part 1 Definition 1. When citing Spinoza's *Ethics* hereafter, I will use this citation style.

14 "… it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God…" (CSM II 46).

15 Spinoza does not use *causa sui* at all in Proposition 11 of Part I suggesting four proofs of the existence of God. He once regarded *causa sui* as the attribute of God before the *Ethics*. See Melamed (2021, 120).

it becomes difficult to explain the transcendence of God in the philosophy of Descartes. Thus, Descartes tries to solve this problem by identifying efficient cause as being analogous (CSM II 167) (Jin 2006, 154-56). Otherwise, *causa sui* as efficient cause should shed light on being prior in time.

According to Jin, the reason Spinoza suggests *causa sui* by the form of definition at the head of Part I of the *Ethics* written with the geometrical order seems to show that it has nothing to do with either a matter of the ultimate basis or the proof of the existence of God (Jin 2006, 165-66). By the geometrical principle, in other words, the "definition" of *causa sui* just plays a role to show that all things per se exist in themselves. In addition, the main feature of *causa sui* is, literally speaking, to mean immanent causality. Thus, Spinoza asserts, "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (E1P18d) and at the same time, "the efficient cause not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence" (E1P25).[16] This is the crucial difference between Descartes and Spinoza. His claim that God as the efficient cause is immanent is to criticize the transcendence of God. By interpreting God as the immanent cause, unlike Descartes, Spinoza's notion of *causa sui* allows us to comprehend God. For example, Melamed (2021, 123) asserts that "immanent causation is not spread across time. If an efficient cause need not be temporally prior to its effect, then one major obstacle to the possibility of self-causation is removed."

Furthezrmore, the implication of what all things *per se* exist in themselves can solve the problem of self-contradiction that Nietzsche criticizes. The reason is because sui, i.e., the self, can be interpreted not as subject, which can produce effect, but as being by itself. In this vein, *causa sui* represents non-reflexiveness of Nature, which means the whole of reality. In conclusion, it is said that Strawson's argument of the impossibility of ultimate moral responsibility heavily relies on the Cartesian account of *causa sui*. As we can see above, there can be spacious room for ontological interpretation and debate even in the arena of comparative philosophy. Why should only Descartes' view be

16 In Proof of Proposition 12, Spinoza, for the first time, links *causa sui* to God after proving the existence of God.

taken, and Spinoza's view be left aside in Strawson's argument? Can we have the other perspective on moral responsibility if we take Spinoza instead of Descartes in understanding *causa sui*?

B. The Supreme Polarity (*Taiji*) as the Spinozian Notion of *Causa Sui*

It is important to examine a dialogue between Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) and Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159-1223), one of the most astute students of Zhu Xi, in understanding Neo-Confucians' view of the Supreme Polarity (*taiji* 太極) in terms of the Spinozian idea of *causa sui*. The idea of the Supreme Polarity has been conceptually controversial even in Zhu Xi's era because both Confucians and Daoists have used it within their own contexts of meaning. Chen Chun wanted to clarify the implication of the Supreme Polarity because, since Zhou Dunyi 周惇頤 (1017-1073), a Neo-Confucian pioneer of the Northern Song, many Neo-Confucian literati had continued to understand it in a Daoist context. It seems obvious that a deep shadow of Daoist influence looms over Zhou's account *of* the Supreme Polarity in the *Taiji tushuo* 太極圖說 (Diagram and Explanation of the Supreme Polarity). The word "*taiji*" seemed to remind Chen Chun of chapter twenty-five of the *Daodejing* 道德經, which leads him to ask whether or not it is prior in time to Heaven-and-Earth (*tiandi* 天地). This is because a phrase from chapter 25—"there exists something undifferentiated before Heaven-and-Earth"[17]—can lead one to imagine the existence of something transcendent, independent of time and space, like the Western conception of God that Descartes pondered.[18] He does not think that the Supreme Polarity should be conceived not only as something transcendent, but also as being antecedent in time. This is conveyed in the following discussion between Chen and Zhu Xi.

> Chen asks his master, Zhu Xi:
>
> The Supreme Polarity is not "something undifferentiated (*hunching*

17 有物混成, 先天地生

18 The translation of chapter 25 is mine. In order to overcome interpretations influenced by the Western theology of God, Ames and Hall philosophically re-translate it as follows: "There was some process that spontaneously, emerging before the heavens and the earth . . ." (2003, 115).

> *zhi wu* 混成之物) and yet formed ahead of Heaven-and-Earth." Rather, isn't it the general name of the principle (*li* 理) of the myriad things and Heaven-and-Earth?
>
> Zhu Xi answers:
>
> The Supreme Polarity is only the principle of the myriad things and Heaven-and-Earth. In terms of Heaven-and-Earth, there is the Supreme Polarity within Heaven-and-Earth. In terms of the myriad things, there is the Supreme Polarity within each thing. Ahead of Heaven-and-Earth, there would not be antecedently the principle. . . . In terms of *yin-yang*, . . . movement and tranquility are ceaseless, *yin* and *yang* also have no beginning. Thus, it is impossible to divide "before" and "after." (Zhu Xi 1986, 1)[19]

Chen's question implies that the Supreme Polarity should be nominal just as Descartes thinks that *causa sui* as efficient cause is to be analogous. Otherwise, it would be problematic to understand the relationship between the Supreme Polarity and Heaven-and-Earth. Chen's attempt to interpret the Supreme Polarity shows that something cannot be prior to the cosmic order of the Heaven-and-Earth. Instead of replying either "yes" nor "no" to Chen's comment, Zhu Xi clearly identifies it with principle (*li* 理), i.e., his main philosophical theme (Zhu Xi 1986, 2).[20] For Zhu Xi, the Supreme Polarity is not a "name" of principle, but principle in itself. This is to emphasize the existence of the Supreme Polarity, which is neither nominal nor transcendent. It is truly real to him. Furthermore, Zhu Xi defines the Supreme Polarity not only as the cosmic order of the Way (*dao* 道), but also as the coherent pattern of the human mind (Zhu Xi 1986, 84).

Moreover, Zhu Xi tries to embrace both the Infinite Polarity (*wuji* 無極)[21] and the Supreme Polarity together in analyzing the opening phrase of Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram and Explanation of the Supreme Polarity*: "The

---

19 Although the concepts of *Li* and *Taiji* are, in fact, interchangeable, it seems that Zhu Xi prefers to use *Li* over *Taiji* due to the latter's Daoist nuance.

20 For conceptual connotations of *Li*, see Graham (1958, 8-22) and Peterson (1986). Hereafter, I will use *Taiji* with the same meaning as Li.

21 The literal translation of *Wuji* is "no ridgepole." *Ji* is a roof ridge indicating the highest point and *wu* is "nothing; without; not have; beyond." So, *Wuji* means something beyond a pole or "infinite, limitless."

Infinite Polarity and, at the same time, the Supreme Polarity (*Wuji er Taiji* 無極而太極)."[22] But, Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139-1192)[23] considers the Infinite Polarity to be something redundant. Zhu Xi contends that the Supreme Polarity can be misunderstood as one ultimate "thing" if the Infinite Polarity is eliminated. If it is considered "one thing" (*yiwu* 一物), then regardless of however ultimate it may be, it cannot but become a finite thing. To Zhu, the Infinite Polarity plays a crucial role in understanding that the Supreme Polarity is an endless process of producing things as well as itself. This dynamic via ceaseless alternation of *yin-yang* is concurrent, but not allowed to be "before-or-after" in time. We can recognize that such an idea is akin to Spinoza's statement as follows: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in in infinite ways" (E1P16).

As I mentioned above, the Supreme Polarity is principle, which can ontologically be identical to the natural disposition (*xing* 性) innately given by the Heavenly Mandate (*tianming* 天命). The meaning of natural disposition entails principle, which is the natural essence of all things. Impartially permeating all through the world, principle can be understood as a sort of efficient cause which not only "makes a thing so" (*suoyiran* 所以然) but which also "makes a thing ought to be" (*suodangran* 所當然). Like Spinoza's version of *causa sui*, the Supreme Polarity as principle can be seen as the immanent and efficient cause of everything. In the philosophy of Zhu Xi, furthermore, the Supreme Polarity as principle is the unitary pattern, despite the fact that it is diversely manifested in all things (*liyi fenshu* 理一分殊) just as the moon is reflected in a thousand rivers. In other words, it is said that human beings are one of the modes of the unitary principle. How does this ontological framework make the relationship not only with free will, but also with moral responsibility?

---

[22] The debate between Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan was to elucidate some points as follows: 1) whether Zhou Dunyi was the authentic writer of the *Diagram and Explanation of the Supreme Polarity*; 2) how to understand the notion of *Wuji*; 3) the meaning of *Ji* (the ridgepole as the Ultimate); and 4) the origin of the *Diagram and Explanation of the Supreme Polarity*? For my argument, I focus on number 2.

[23] For the debate, also see Tillman (1992, 216-22).

III. Moral Responsibility and the Concept of a Person

A. Moral Responsibility Without Free Will[24]

We have seen that the Supreme Polarity (*taiji* 太極) is an internalized principle (*li* 理) that "makes a thing so" (*suoyiran* 所以然). Furthermore, principle is the unitary and perfect network that "nothing ever slips through"[25] (*Daodejing*, ch. 73). How or what can we do freely within such a perfect world? It seems that there is no free will at all if the Supreme Polarity means the perfect order permeates into all things. Is it possible to be morally responsible for our actions without free will?

We need first to question what moral responsibility means in relation to the debate on free will and determinism. For example, the debate often tries to solve the issue of compatibility by sliding into the relationship between free will and moral responsibility. Thus, to justify the possibility of moral responsibility, we believe, is to prove that we have free will or to conclude that it can be compatible with determinism. But we never say that a rock has either responsibility or free will while it would be said that it truly belongs to a deterministic world ruled by causal law of physics. What about animals and plants like amoebas, dogs, and ivy? Can we even say that they are morally responsible for their actions or movements? Rather than the matter of moral responsibility, I think, Strawson's argument tries to prove that human beings cannot be the first cause by themselves, which belongs to an ontological approach to what makes you who you are. What I want to point out here is that the ideas of moral responsibility and free will belong to advanced mental activities promoted by socio-cultural context through human interaction. The concept of responsibility is always entailed within specific socio-cultural milieu rather than being used as the key word of the debate on compatibility with free will. We can claim either that free will is a necessary condition for responsibility

24 According to Christopher Kluz, Spinoza argues that social rewards and punishments can be justified while even denying the existence of free will. On Spinoza's idea on moral responsibility without free will, see Kluz (2015).

25 天網恢恢, 疎而不失

or that there is responsibility without free will depending on how the ontological concept of a person is defined in accordance with the cultural landscape.

In Neo-Confucian metaphysics, principle is the cause that "makes a thing ought to be" (*suodangran* 所當然) as well as the cause that "makes a thing so" (*suoyiran* 所以然). This seems to imply that the cause of existence *per se* is equivalent to a kind of teleological force that humanizes us. Furthermore, the teleological force urges us to ask the normative question of how one should live. This fundamental question shows that a person has an innate sense of responsibility for teleological normativity, regardless of the question of whether or not we have free will. How can a person realize that s/he has such a sense of responsibility even though it is innately given to us? Can the realization of responsibility be called a sense of freedom or free will? It need not, I think, necessarily come across that way.

B. Self-Assignment (*Ziren* 自任) and the Concept of a Person

> The noble person delves into it deeply according to the Way (*dao* 道), wishing to get it in himself. As he gets it in himself, he abides in it calmly; abiding in it calmy, he trusts in it deeply; trusting in it deeply, he draws on its source, which he finds both to his left and to his right. This is why the noble person wishes to get it for himself (*zide* 自得). (*Mencius* 4B.14)[26]

According to Mencius, we, humans, have the faculty of intellect to follow the Way (*dao* 道). This faculty cannot be called free will in terms of the modern identity of the self. But it would be the will of choice or the right to decide in that the faculty tries to follow the Way. The self-awareness through the Way[27] leads us to realize what we should do by ourselves (*Zhongyong*, ch. 1). The self-realization is a kind of an internal cause to make one awaken and assign what one should live. Conveying what Yi Yin says in the story of his going to serve in the court of the sage king Tang, Mencius comments as follows: "He thought that if,

[26] English translations of the *Mencius* are by Lau (2003).

[27] The Way is immanent in that it cannot be left for an instant.

among the people of the world, there was a common man or a common woman who did not share in the benefits bestowed by Yao and Shun, it was as if he himself had pushed them into a ditch. So it was that he took upon himself the responsibility for the heavy weight of the world" (*Mencius* 5B.1). In the Mencian context, the sense of self-assignment (*ziren* 自任) is based on Yi Yin's claim that "Heaven causes those who are first to know to awaken those who are later to know and causes those who are first to be awakened to awaken those who are later to be awakened" (*Mencius* 5B.1).

This description shows that the self-awareness stems from compassion for others, which tries to make this world better. Even though it seems a typical story of heroic people, it can be generalized as a way of making the relationship between the self and the world that most people can experience. The awareness can be a kind of self-causality that makes me become myself, and a better person.[28] To Mencius, the concept of self-realization via the Way is the source of all activities, which allows us to pursue them of our own will. Through self-realization, the responsibility one must take can be understood as self-assignment. How do we ontologically explain the ideas of self-realization and self-assignment? It is said that one should establish the internal substance first by steeping oneself in the Way. This could be one of the ways to get the power of self-determination in solving predicaments one may encounter in the world. In short, those who take responsibility have a sense of solidarity with the myriad things in the world, which is theoretically supported by the unitary principle and its diverse manifestation (*liyi fenshu* 理一分殊).

This leads us to how we should define the idea of a person as an active agent in understanding the relationship between the self and the world. Not only Zhu Xi, but most Confucian scholars have regarded social engagement as their mission. The theoretical background for this can be found in the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean) and the

28 Strawson does not think that such a self-awareness is possible. In order for it to be possible, according to him, it should premise certain prior conditions like heredity or early experience. Furthermore, Strawson argues that we must endlessly require certain prior conditions in order to be what we are as we now are. This is the reason why he requests the concept of *causa sui*.

Zhouyi 周易 (Book of Changes).

> Only that one in the world who is most perfectly sincere is able to give full development to his nature. Being able to give full development to his nature, he is able to give full development to the nature of other human beings and, being able to give full development to the nature of other human beings, he is able to give full development to the nature of other living things. Being able to give full development to the nature of other living things, he can assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven-and-Earth; being able to assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven-and-Earth, he can form a triad with Heaven-and-Earth. (*Zhongyong* 22)[29]

> The great person is the man whose virtues is unified with Heaven-and-Earth, brightness with the sun and the moon, his orderly procedure with the four seasons, and his auspicious and inauspicious signs with the operations of gods and spirits. He may be ahead of Heaven, but Heaven is not discordant with him; he follows Heaven but accedes the timing of its moments. Even Heaven cannot be discordant with him, how much less will humans! How much less will the gods and spirits! ("Qian 乾," in *Zhouyi*)[30]

In the Chinese view of (great) persons quoted above, (great) persons ontologically have a status equivalent to Heaven-and-Earth (*tiandi* 天地). Their status will be accomplished by harmoniously matching with the cosmic pattern of Heaven-and-Earth. Such accordance is an ultimate state of harmony through a process of self-consummation, which the ancient Chinese ought to pursue, but not something transcendent that we can never reach. In this context, great persons will take ultimate responsibility just as Heaven-and-Earth do. In other words, all agents voluntarily try to participate in the transformation of the world. Such active participation implies that one comes to realize what one ought to do in this world (*Zhongyong* 22). The realization via participation is to have a sense of responsibility. To Confucian scholars, the ultimate responsibility is to consummate the Heavenly Principle (*tianli* 天理) of

[29] English translation of the *Doctrine of the Mean* by Bloom (1999, 338).
[30] English translation of the *Book of Changes* by Lynn (1994, 138).

things through participation in transforming the world. That is why Gu Yanwu holds that "even common people are responsible for the rise and fall of the world" (Gu 2007, vol. 13, 723). Moreover, a process of fulfilling responsibility can extend a sense of freedom in terms of a state of realizing or identifying with the Heavenly Principle.

IV. Moral Responsibility and the Confucian Account of Desires

In addition to the issue of *causa sui*, the debate on freedom of the will is more persuasive in Harry Frankfurt's analysis of human desires when considering the Confucian understanding of human beings. For example, Frankfurt's argument is reminiscent of the Mencian account of desires. It suggests that freedom of the will can be found in the classical Confucian texts without consideration of the ontological framework.

> (On the one hand), though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs. On the other hand, though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death. That is why there are troubles I do not avoid. If there is nothing a man wants more than life, then why should he have scruples about any means, so long as it will serve to keep him alive? If there is nothing a man loathes more than death, then why should he have scruples about any means, so long as it shows him the way to avoid trouble? Yet there are ways of remaining alive and ways of avoiding death to which a man will not resort. In other words, there are things a man wants more than life and there are also things he loathes more than death. This is an attitude not confined to the moral man but common to all men. The moral man simply never loses it (*Mencius* 6A.10).

This is the last part of the famous chapter on "Bear's Paws" in the *Mencius*. In the beginning, Mencius says that he prefers a bear's paw to fish. This analogy of delicious food is a sort of prologue to a hierarchy of desires. When forced to choose between life and rightness, which means incompatible choices of desires, he is willing to take what he desires more than life even though he knows his life is priceless. To Mencius, such persons know to give up their lives for more precious

desires that they want to preserve (*Mencius* 6A.10). All persons will pursue whatever they want to do by measuring values among various possibilities (choosable, incompatible, or alternative). The dynamics of measuring desires shows that persons have the urge toward the higher forms of organization, which enables us to flourish in the dimension of civilization. To choose better desires by comparing them to others not only implies freedom of the will, which Harry Frankfurt (1971) explained, but also a sense of responsibility toward a better life. Such a desire measurement means that persons have second-order desires, which are a sort of default condition to move onto an improved phase of personhood.

Thus, the primary upshot of the statement above has nothing to do with the significance of choice in relation to the idea of free will. Rather, it is that in our lives we inevitably must take responsibility for things. How, then, should we characterize the nature and status of this responsibility? Some who are inclined to fatalism might be tempted to call it "unavoidable." Others who are inclined to deterministic explanations might see it as causally determined. On the account that I have reconstructed here, however, it is something one should not avoid, rather than something inevitable. What one should not avoid can expose one's active choice while something inevitable can be seen as what one should passively and inescapably accept. These statements would be seen as a chasm between a metaphysical and a normative claim. However, the way of being cannot, in a sense, be separated from the way of what one should live. In particular, most of the leading Confucian thinkers including Mencius had never ever imagined that factual statements can be left from normative claims. For example, the agent can choose to act otherwise than he or she in fact did or will.[31] However, she seems to choose what she cannot help but do. What makes her do so? Can we consider her choice a matter of free will? How can she realize what she cannot help but do? How do we understand her choice if it cannot be called either an inevitable fate or deterministic event? On the view I have articulated here, her choice is derived from awareness

[31] The story of summoning the gamekeeper by Duke Jing of Qi in *Mencius* 5B.7 is one of the appropriate examples.

of who she should really be. In other words, this is because the agent knows that there is something she ought to do as a human being and even as a person with the special responsibilities that Confucians believe to be incumbent upon "those who are first awakened" (*Mencius* 5A.7). Furthermore, it is important for one to know what one must do in the network of the myriad things and fulfill the responsibility one should take.

V. Conclusion

Isn't it reasonable to say that the cause making you who you are is in yourself? This paper has started with an alternative interpretation of *causa sui*. It has been a commonsensical idea in the East Asian intellectual tradition that the creation and changes of myriad things depend on the spontaneity of the thing in itself. Under the perfect network of the Heavenly Principle (*tianli* 天理), it would be an illusion to regard the spontaneity as free will or freedom of the will. On the other hand, we need also to be aware of that to inquire what Confucians were thinking about freedom or free will may be an attempt to reconstruct a fiction, onto which a modern framework is anachronistically projected. This is either because it is requested by the legal mind of some modern system or because it is another approach to the issue of free will with determinism, which is based upon a totally different metaphysical foundation.

Like Spinoza's account of *causa sui*, a different ontological understanding of a person can make a different relationship between moral responsibility and free will. For example, the ontological claim that the unitary principle of Heaven-and-Earth (*tiandi* 天地) is innately immanent in each person seems to endorse the possibility of ultimate responsibility even though the teleological commitment to making the world better implies the absence of free will.

As we can see chapter 22 of *Zhongyong*, human beings are equivalent to Heaven-and-Earth in making the world better. It means that we are ultimately responsible for our actions, which contribute to the entire process of civilization. The maxim of Fan Zhongyan, "to

be first in worrying about the world's worries and last in enjoying its pleasures" (Fan 2007, 195),[32] shows well the normative responsibility, which is originated from the ontological relationship between the self and the world. It also implies that a person in the Confucian world is determined to devote themselves to the ideal values. These perspectives indicate that the issue of whether free will exists or not does not matter here. Instead, it refers to an alternative way that we can have moral responsibility without free will. This is, I believe, one of the reasons that the debate on free will and determinism seems to be absent in Chinese thought.

32 From Fan Zhongyan's "Record of Yueyang Pavilion" paraphrasing one of the sentences in *Mencius* 1B.4.

REFERENCES

Ames, Roger. 2001. *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the* Zhongyong. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall, trans. 2003. *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Bloom, Irene. 1999. "The Mean (*Zhongyong*)." In Vol. 1 of *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press.

Charité — Universitätsmedizin Berlin. 2016. "The Brain-Computer Duel: Do We Have Free Will? Researchers Test Mechanisms Involved in Decision-making." ScienceDaily. Accessed August 1, 2022. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/ 2016/01/160104130826.htm.

Defoort, Carine. 1991. "Causation in Chinese Philosophy." In *A Companion to World Philosophies*, edited by Eliot Deutsch and Ronald Bontekoe, 165-73. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Descartes, Rene. 1984. Vol. 3 of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fan, Zhongyan 范仲淹. 2007. *Fan Zhongyan Quanji* 范仲淹 全集 (The Complete Work of Fan Zhongyan). Chengdu: Sichuan University Psress.

Frankfurt, Harry. 1969. "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *Journal of Philosophy* 66: 829-39.

_____. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* 68: 5-20.

Graham, A. C. 1958. *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan*. London: Lund Humphries.

Gowans, Christopher W. 2017. "Why the Buddha Did Not Discuss 'The Problem of Free Will and Determinism.'" In *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency?*, edited by Rick Repetti, 11-21. London: Routledge.

Gu, Yanwu 顧炎武. 2007. *Rizhilu jiaozhu* 日知錄校注 (The Record of Achieving Knowledge in Everyday), annotated by Chen Yuan 陳垣. Hefei: Anhui University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1969. *Identity and Difference*, translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Hoefer, Carl. 2016. "Causal Determinism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed January 21, 2016. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/determinism-causal

Jin, Tae-won 진태원. 2006. "Seupinoja-ui jagiwonin gaenyeom" 스피노자의 자기원인 개념 (The Concept of *Causa Sui* in Spinoza). *Cheolhak sasang* 철학사상 (Journal of Philosophical Ideas) 22: 141-71.

Kluz, Christopher. 2015. "Moral Responsibility without Free Will: Spinoza's Social Approach." In *Doing Without Free Will: Spinoza and Contemporary Moral Problems*, edited by Ursula Goldenbaum and Christopher Kluz. London: Lexington Books.

Lynn, Richard J. 1994. *The Classic of Changes*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marchal, Kai, and Christian Helmut Wenzel. 2017. "Chinese Perspectives on Free Will." In *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, edited by Kevin Timpe, Meghan Griffith, and Neil Levy, 374-88.

Melamed, Yitzhak Y. 2021. "Spinoza on *Causa Sui*." In *A Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley & Sons.

Mencius 孟子. 2003. *Mencius: Revised Edition*, translated by D. C. Lau. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

Peterson, Willard J. 1986. "Another Look at *Li*." *The Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies* 18: 13-31.

Schwartz, Benjamin. 1959. "Some Polarities in Confucian Thought." In *Confucianism in Action*, edited by David S. Nivison and Arthur F. Wright, 50-63. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Spinoza, Baruch. 1992. *Ethics*, *Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Strawson, Galen. 2005. "The Bounds of Freedom." In *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, edited by Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____. 2008a. "Free Agents." In *Real Materialism and Other Essays*, 359-86. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

_____. 2008b. "The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility." In *Real Materialism and Other Essays*, 319–31. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Strawson, Peter S. 1962. "Freedom and Resentment." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48: 187-211.

Summerell, Orrin F. 2002. "Self-Causality from Plotinus to Eckhart and from Descartes to Kant." *Quaestio* 2: 493-518.

Tillman, Hoyt C. 1992. *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi's Ascendancy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Van Nordern, Bryan. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zhu Xi 朱熹. 1983. *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu* 四書章句集註 (Compiled Commentaries on *Four Books*). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

_____. 1986. *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類 (Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically), edited by Li Jingde. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

_____. 1996. *Zhu Xi Ji* 朱熹集 (The Works of Zhu Xi). Chengdu: Sichuan Educational Publishing.

■ Submitted: 29 March 2022
Accepted: 2 August 2022