Coping with Incommensurable Pursuits:
Rorty, Berlin, and the Confucian-Daoist Complementarity

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Living a human life is about choosing alternatives, from alternative actions, to alternative values, to alternative ways of life. These alternatives are often incommensurable. They also are, or can be, incompatible; choosing one necessitates rejecting others. How to cope with incommensurable and incompatible alternatives is an important question for philosophers. This question becomes even more acute in today's multicultural world. In this paper I will explore three models that provide insights to this question. I will first examine Richard Rorty's view on two human pursuits, i.e., "private perfection" and "human solidarity," and his attempt to separate the public and the private spheres as a solution to accommodate these two pursuits. Then I will examine the work of Isaiah Berlin, whose interpretation of Niccolo Machiavelli provides a second model. My examination of Rorty and Berlin will lead to critiques of both philosophers. Finally, I will present the Confucian-Daoist complementarity model. I believe that a useful way to tackle this question is to examine and see how value systems--which represent and crystallize different ways of life—accommodate various human pursuits. I will make the case that the Confucian-Daoist complementarity model can help us understand and handle different value patterns within and across societies.

I

In his influential book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty describes two kinds of human ideals. They are represented by such authors as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov on the one hand, and Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls on the other. The first group of writers exemplifies the ideal of self-perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life. The second is that of "fellow citizens," who advocates the ideal of social justice and human solidarity. The first kind of pursuit may be idiosyncratic in character, e.g., one's love for a particular kind of poetry or music, one's obsession with wild orchids (like the young Rorty himself), and one's religious passion to become a recluse in the Himalaya Mountains.[1] As Rorty puts it, "what matters to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people." (1999, 13) The second kind of pursuit is universal in character, e.g., one's shared sense of solidarity with other human beings, one's devotion to fight capitalism or communism, and one's sacrifice to organize a political party in order to improve society.

Even though Rorty's exemplary authors seem to point in opposite directions, self-creation and human solidarity are not necessarily opposed. Rorty writes,

> The two will, for some people, coincide—as they do in those lucky
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> Christians for whom the love of God and of other human beings are
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> inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought
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> of social justice. (1999, 13)

For those "lucky" people, it is indeed possible to integrate the pursuit of self-creation and the pursuit of human solidarity into one consistent whole. Mohandas Gandhi may be an apt

[1] Another good example may be Helen Vendler, the A. Kingsley Porter university professor at Harvard University. The prominent poetry critic is quoted in the January 26, 2005, *Chronicle of Higher Education* as saying "I have never joined a political party. I have never voted. I have never registered to vote. I have never gone to a church. I have never belonged to a club. I've never belonged to anything."

example. Gandhi spent his life fighting for social justice. It is precisely through the pursuit of human solidarity that Gandhi excelled, or should we say, created himself as a national hero. Mother Teresa may be another good example. From a "very small, quiet and shy" and "ordinary" nun, as described by members of her early congregation, Mother Teresa created in herself sainthood through her life-long pursuit of social justice and human solidarity.

Rorty's point, however, is that self-creation and human solidarity do not have to coincide and that it is all right when they do not. He writes, these two ideals of life "need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so." (1999, 13) It may be safe to say that, for most people at most times, these two ideals do not coincide; what one does in the pursuit of one ideal does not simultaneously advance one's pursuit of the other. In Rorty's view, demands of these pursuits can be "equally valid, yet forever incommensurable." (Rorty, 1989, xv) He writes,

> We should only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision. (Rorty, 1989, xiv)

To hold them in a single vision, for Rorty, is to "weave" or "tie in" them together. (1999, 13) If I understand Rorty correctly, I would say that he does not mean by "a single vision" merely "weave" or "tie in" the two together; for loosely speaking, "balancing" the two into a single life may also be described as "weaving" or "tying in" them together. By "a single vision" Rorty means to "weave" and "tie in" them together in such a way that whatever advances one automatically advances the other. The desire to weave all good things into "a single vision" can be traced all way back to Plato, who attempts to hold reality and justice in a single vision. For Plato, the real is the good and the good is the real; whatever is good for

the soul is always good for humanity. Plato's system of Forms is supposed to ensure that everything falls neatly into a single vision of the Good. Rorty wants to finally declare the futility of this attempt and to put the last nail in its coffin.

While I strongly agree with Rorty in his resistance to the "single vision" philosophy, he appears to have underestimated the tension, even conflict, between different pursuits. It seems to me, even if we do not attempt to mould private perfection and human solidarity in one philosophical outlook, the two groups of authors cited by Rorty are opposed in an important sense. They are opposed because they are exemplars of *opposing* pursuits. I would say that two pursuits are opposed to each other if they compete for "space" in a person's life in such a way that, at some point of the process, the increase of one necessitates the decrease of the other. As in sports, two individuals or two teams are opposed when they compete; gaining for one necessitates losing for the other. Of course, opposing pursuits are not limited to self-creation and human solidarity. As Charles Taylor puts it, "the act with the best consequences may conflict in some situation with the demands of my integrity. Or the demands of benevolence to others may conflict with those of my own fulfillment. Or the demands of justice may conflict with those of mercy and compassion." (Taylor, 1997, 170) For the sake of argument, however, we will not involve other pursuits until later. Between Rorty's two pursuits, he does not deny that there can be mutual effect. He recognizes that "your private process of self-creation may result in your deciding that you have more, or fewer, responsibilities to others than you had previously thought." (Festenstein and Thompson, 2001, 202) But from here Rorty does not go further, at least not explicitly, to recognize their mutual effect to the extent that they can conflict with each other.

I believe that, for the "unlucky" people, there is tension between the pursuit of self-creation and the pursuit of human solidarity. Unmanaged, the tension can become conflict, when the pursuit of one ideal demote or impedes the one's pursuit of the other ideal. In some way, this is like requesting state budget for education and for law enforcement. The two do not necessarily conflict, but tension exists between the two allocations. The two come into conflict when the increase for one area necessitates decrease for the other. The examples that Rorty uses show this kind of tension; when the two pursuits do not coincide, being more like Rorty's exemplars of self-creation is to be less like his exemplars of human solidarity. I would suggest that one plausible account of the lack of success in the pursuit of human solidarity by authors in Rorty's first group is that their way of pursuing self-creation, and the extent to which they pursue self-creation, leave little room for the pursuit of human solidarity.

We can talk about conflict between these two pursuits in the sense of the word as is used in "conflict of interest," where two interests point to incompatible directions. The two pursuits may come into conflict in many ways. Different demands may logically contradict one another; obviously if the need for human solidarity and justice called one to join the Free French Forces to fight the Nazis, while one's pursuit in self-creation demanded one to be a Jain pacifist, the two demands could not be met at the same time. Or different demands may compete for resources; devoting one's time to writing a lifetime book for self-fulfillment necessitates taking quality time away from one's effort to strengthen the family and community; joining the Peace Corp will put off, if not put an end to, the realization of one's dream of becoming a spiritual recluse; using time and energy to learn and memorize the names of all wild orchids in New England prevents one from using the same time and energy to participate in the Boy Scots or to help the Salvation Army.

Rorty is optimistic in dealing with the pursuit of self-creation and the pursuit of human solidarity. He suggests that we should "not to try to choose between them but, rather, give them equal weight and then use them for different purposes." (1989, xiv) "To choose between them" means to pick one and reject the other, as people sometimes do. "To use them for different purposes" is to pursue each at different times and to alternate these pursuits. For Rorty, self-creation is a private matter, while human solidarity or social justice is public in nature. The two occupy different realms; we should separate the private and the public; at some times one concentrates on private self-creation, and at other times one concentrates on public justice. The two need not interfere with each other and one can engage in them alternately.

Rorty's approach leaves ample room for individual freedom and provides a much-needed strong voice for individuality in our contemporary society. But his view seems to rely too much on an easy separation between the private and the public spheres. If the private and the public spheres are as separate as Rorty makes them to appear, then tension and conflict between his two pursuits might have been non-existent as Rorty makes it sound. However, the reality is that the so-called "private" almost always has some kind of effect on the "public," and vice versa. Consequently, the pursuit of self-creation and the pursuit of social justice almost always affect one another. For those who do not put these pursuits into "a single vision," there is almost always tension in between. Overlooking this tension will inevitably lead to the pursuit of one at a great cost to the other. For people who pursue both ideals (that is virtually all of us), it is important not to overlook this tension.

For Rorty, we need to have both self-creation and human solidarity,[2] as David Hall writes,

> Rorty insists that we remain sensitive to the manner in which private self-
> creation can lead to cruelty. Such can occur if we seek to employ others for
> purposes of private gratification, or if we use more than our fair share of
> resources, or if the amount of time spent in self-creation excludes any exercise
> in the support of justice and fairness in public, or if the self we create is a
> dumb clod or an arrogant aesthete, insensitive to the pain and humiliation
> suffered by others. Alternatively, of course, it is likely that too much yielding
> to public need will result in a narrow, hollow, and dull personality. (Hall,
> 1994, 111)

If David Hall's interpretation of Rorty is correct—I believe that Hall has presented at least a plausible interpretation—Rorty holds that a sensible person should maintain a balance between self-creation and human solidarity.

It can be argued that, with a very small number of exceptions, the vast majority of people do attempt to integrate self-creation and human solidarity into a balance vis-à-vis "a single vision," even though there is no consensus as to what the ideal balance would be. Conceivably, one person may want to give self-creation a larger role than human solidarity in her balancing whereas another may want to give human solidarity a larger role.[3] Heidegger definitely encouraged self-creation. He, however, did not entirely reject human solidarity. For instance, he writes,

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[2] Rorty did not say that his first group rejects human solidarity and his second group rejects self-creation.
[3] These two, however, do not have to be on a single scale. As in our state budget allocation example, in addition to education and law enforcement, there are health care and other sectors.

Rather, the sole implication [in *Being and Time*] is that the highest

determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realize the

proper dignity of man. To that extent the thinking in *Being and Time* is

against humanism. But this opposition does not mean that such thinking

aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it

promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of man. (Heidegger,

1993, 233)

For Heidegger, self-creation definitely has a primary significance because, as he writes,

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only

from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only

in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the

word "God" is to signify. (1993, 253)

The "truth of Being" is realized in the authentic existence of Dasein;[4] "God" is commonly

used as a covering word for social justice.

Marx fought for human solidarity. He, however, did not rule out self-creation or

private perfection as evidenced in his works such as *The Economic and Philosophic

Manuscripts of 1844.* For Marx, overcoming alienation is a means of self-fulfillment. Only in

the ideal society can individuals be complete in self-creation. Many would regard Marx's

accomplishments in philosophical writings as an example of his own self-creation or self-

fulfillment.

Therefore, an accurate characterization of accommodating these two pursuits is to say

that one way is to put self-creation ahead of human solidarity, as found in the exemplars of

Rorty's first group, and another is to put human solidarity ahead of self-creation, as found in

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[4] For a discussion of the truth of Being in Heidegger, see Li (1999), Chapter 2.

the exemplars of Rorty's second group. There are various balancing choices. [5] Some give

self-creation the leading role whereas others give human solidarity the leading role. This is

another way to show that the two groups of Rorty's exemplar authors are opposed. On this

understanding, whereas some "lucky" people can bring the two pursuits into a single vision

and some cannot, no one can bring these *two kinds of balancing*—one with self-creation as

the leading value and the other with human solidarity as the leading value—into a single

vision. Such a characterization requires us to look into not self-creation and human solidarity

as individual values, but into different patterns or systems of values, as I will discuss later.

      If my above discussion is right, Rorty has underestimated the tension and conflict

between different pursuits, and he has overlooked the close connection between the "private"

and the "public" spheres. In addition, I believe that Rorty has also failed to give adequate

consideration to the influence of culture patterns on individuals' choice of pursuits. For the

vast majority of people, their ways of balancing competitive values are heavily influenced

and, sometimes even largely determined, by the culture and society in which they live. To be

sure, there are always individuals in any society who deviate more from cultural norms than

others, and, overall, modern societies tolerate these individuals more than traditional societies.

However, the vast majority in society also makes their balancing of various pursuits, and

their ways of balance reflect the large cultural patterns in society. Whether we like it or not,

the vast majority of people are, more or less, "a copy or a replica," being so without

experiencing anything like "the strong poet's anxiety of influence." (Rorty, 1989, 24) They

live in a world "one never made, an inherited world," and live without the fear of the "strong

poet," the fear of leaving no mark behind. (ibid., 28) Even if they each make some kind of

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[5] If we can read Rorty literally, his kind of balancing would be to give both "equal weight." (1989, xiv)

mark in the world, but it is too trivial to be taken seriously. In an era of individuality, this may seem sad, but it is a fact. The vast majority of people embody humanity as much, if not more, as those of the "strong poet" type, and that philosophy needs to address their ways of life. I think Rorty recognizes this (e.g., ibid., 43). But in my view, he has overemphasized individuals' idiosyncratic aspects and overlooked larger cultural patterns impressed in them. One may hold that the cultural pattern is nothing more than the summary of the individuals' behaviors. This conception, however, does not do justice to the fact that cultural patterns continue over generations and shape the behavior of individuals that are born into it one at a time. While I accept contingency in the formation of selfhood, I maintain that, for the vast majority of people, the kind of contingency that lead them to idiosyncrasies is not as great as Rorty appears to want us to believe. For this reason, we cannot adequately understand individuals' pursuits independent of the cultural patterns in the society. To cultural patterns in society our discussion will turn now.

<div align="center">II</div>

In his article "The Originality of Machiavelli" Isaiah Berlin discusses different patterns of values by presenting a new interpretation of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Berlin's interpretation provides us with another interesting way to understand human pursuits in the world.

The sixteenth century writer Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *The Discourses* have been a source of controversy for scholars. There have been numerous interpretations of his works. The commonest view, that of the "murderous Machiavelli," is predominant in the Elizabethan literature. According to this view, Machiavelli is the teacher of evil, a

great subverter, and a dishonorable writer. Therefore, he is an example of the worst type of humanity, and any moral person must fight what Machiavelli stands for. It is for this purpose alone one should read Machiavelli. Another view, however, is that Machiavelli cannot have literally meant what he said in these works and that he was being satirical. He tells us what some politicians are capable of in achieving their goals, and thereby issues us a cautionary warning of what tyrants could be and do. That is the way we should read him; other readings are missing Machiavelli's point. Accordingly, Machiavelli is at most a messenger who is subject to being misunderstood, but we should not shoot this satiric messenger. The third view is that Machiavelli is an anguished humanist, who "laments the vices of men which makes such wicked courses politically unavoidable" and who divorces politics from ethics. According to this view, ethics requires good virtues such as humility, love, and kindness, whereas politics demands the art of success and the skill of getting what one wants. Therefore, politics belong to a domain independent of ethics. Hence, we should not use ethics to evaluate one's political maneuver.[6] (Berlin, 1979, 28-9) The varieties of Machiavelli interpretations continue.

According to Berlin, however, in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* Machiavelli holds that there are two incompatible systems of moral values, that a person has to choose between them, and that choosing one system necessitates rejecting the other. While it may be disputable whether the originality of this idea belongs to Machiavelli or to Berlin himself, this idea itself is extremely important and is worth further exploration of its implications for us today.

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[6] On this interpretation, Machiavelli bears (limited) resemblance to Reinhold Niebuhr in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932). I have resisted this tendency to separate ethical values and political values. See Li (1999, Chapter 7).

On Berlin's reading, Machiavelli sees two incompatible moralities represented by two

sets of moral virtues. One set is Christian morality: love of God, charity, mercy, sacrifice,

forgiveness of enemies, faith in the life hereafter, contempt for the goods of this world, belief

in the salvation of the individual soul as an incomparable value, one that is higher than any

social or political or other terrestrial goal and any economic or military or aesthetic

consideration. (Berlin, 1979, 45) These virtues or values are the principles according to

which Christians organize affairs in their lives. The other set is the morality of the pagan

world. The pagan morality is centered around such virtues as courage, vigor, discipline,

happiness, strength, justice, pride, pursuit of glory and magnificence, above all assertion of

one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction. (Berlin,

1979, 44-45) These two sets of morals represent two entirely different ideals of society. They

are not only different but also fundamentally incompatible. If one sets one's life toward the

ideal of the virtuous Christian life, one cannot at the same time effectively pursue the pagan

ideal of life.

Berlin maintains that Machiavelli does not deny that these Christian virtues are

indeed good moral virtues; Machiavelli does not say or imply that virtues such as humility,

kindness, unworldliness, faith in God, love, unwavering truthfulness, compassion are bad or

unworthy virtues. A person of these virtues is indeed a good person, as indicated in Chapter

XV of *The Prince*.[7] However, these virtues are not compatible with those needed for building

a great state, which is Machiavelli's primary goal. Machiavelli argues that, regardless of their

intrinsic value, the central Christian virtues are "insuperable obstacles to the building of the

kind of society" that he wishes to see, the kind of society he believes better satisfies the

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[7] "A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief
among so many who are not good." (*The Prince*, XV) Here "goodness" evidently refers to Christian virtues.

permanent human desires and interests. (Berlin, 1979, 46) Meekness or the search for spiritual salvation by no means leads toward a satisfactory, stable, vigorous, strong society on earth. On the other hand, the pursuit of justice and power contradicts the moral value of forgiveness and mercy. Therefore, between these two incompatible pursuits of moral values in life, *one must choose*. "To choose to lead a Christian life is to condemn oneself to political impotence," and to choose to lead a life of the pagan virtues is to abandon the Christian ideal. (Berlin, 1979, 47)

However, what usually happens, in the view of (Berlin's) Machiavelli, is that most people cannot bring themselves resolutely to follow either of these paths, and they end up taking the middle way (e.g., *The Discourse,* I: 26). They compromise between these two ideals and attempt to incorporate virtues into their lives from both moralities. But this way is worse than resolutely choosing one and rejecting the other. Machiavelli sees such a compromise as "injurious" that makes people neither altogether good nor altogether bad (e.g., *The Discourse,* I: 26). As Berlin puts it, "they try to effect compromises, vacillate, fall between two stools, and end in weakness and failure." (1979, 47) These people do not understand that whoever has chosen an omelet cannot do so without breaking eggs; they end up mixing whole eggs in their omelet. As Berlin puts it, to be a good physician is to be ready to burn, to cauterize, to amputate, when the treatment requires. To stop halfway because of personal qualms or requirements for some other professions can only give you the worst of the two worlds.

A better way, in (Berlin's) Machiavelli's view, is to choose one of these incompatible paths. And according Berlin, Machiavelli realizes the inevitability of the choice and opts for the pagan ideal of life. In doing so, Berlin maintains, Machiavelli is not abandoning morality

per se and his values are indeed moral values. The conflict between these two life paths is not between autonomous realms of morals and politics, nor between the moral and the immoral; rather it is one between two incompatible moralities.

We should note that Berlin's interpretation is grounded in his value-pluralism. Berlin believes, I think rightly so, that values as ends that we pursue in life can conflict. He writes, "The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others." (Berlin, 1969, 168) He would agree with Machiavelli that humility and pride are contrary values and so are justice and forgiveness. If justice demands adequate punishment, to forgive and to forgo deserved punishment undermines justice. Like Rorty, Berlin rejects one of the deepest assumptions of western political and philosophical thought, "the idea of the world and of human society as a single intelligible structure," a single principle "which not only regulates the course of sun and the stars, but prescribes their proper behavior to all animate creatures." (Berlin, 1979, 67). According to this assumption, there exists a single universal principle that regulates all moral values. This principle, like Plato's Good, is all-encompassing and never self-contradictory. It has the power to organize all human values in a logical and consistent pattern into a coherent system. For Berlin, this long-held belief is fallacious. He maintains that, first, there are ends that are equally ultimate; second, it is in terms of these ends that everything else is justified; third, these ends are fundamentally incompatible with one another; and fourth, therefore there is "no single universal overarching standard" that would enable us to choose rationally between different ultimate ends. (Berlin, 1979, 69) Based on these ideas, Berlin's Machiavelli has to reject the hope to look for a perfect system of values and the hope to look

for a single morality that prescribes a perfect society. For Berlin, because of the inherent nature of (conflicting) values, the very idea of such a perfect value system is simply incoherent.

Thus, the originality of Berlin's Machiavelli lies in uncovering that there may be more than one valid system of values, and there is no criterion common to the systems whereby a rational choice can be made between them. (Berlin, 1979, 71) For Berlin, the realization of this impossibility is of extreme importance to moral philosophers. If we accept this thesis, we will have to think of and evaluate various value systems in an entirely different light.

I find myself in agreement with Berlin that there is more than one valid value system. But here let me discuss where I do not agree with him. In my opinion, Berlin's Machiavelli (or perhaps Berlin himself) overstates his case. Berlin's Machiavelli not only construes the two value systems, the Christian and the pagan, as opposed, but also as two with mutually exclusive values. According to Berlin, Machiavelli sees the Christian morality as incorporating one set of virtues whereas the pagan morality as incorporating a set of entirely different virtues. Because these two sets of virtues are contrary to each another, they do not mix into the same value system. In my opinion, Berlin's Machiavelli has confused two propositions. The first proposition is that some virtues or moral values are contrary to and conflict with one another. The other proposition is that it is impossible for these opposing virtues to be incorporated into one value system. I think the first proposition is true whereas the second is false.

Contrary and conflicting values *can* be incorporated into one value system. In fact, we can hardly find any value system in history that does not incorporate conflicting values.

There is abundant evidence to show that Christian morality also values discipline and strength, while pagan morality values sacrifice. The real difference is not, as Berlin's Machavelli holds to be, that one group of virtues is found exclusively in Christian morality while the other exclusively in pagan morality. In my view, the real difference is that, while both moralities contain these varieties of values, they do not give the same priorities to these values. Christian morality gives higher priorities to such values as charity, mercy, forgiveness and faith in the life after, and gives lower priorities to such values as courage and strength.[8] Pagan morality gives higher priorities to such values or virtues as courage, vigor, strength, and justice, and gives lower priorities to such values as charity, mercy, forgiveness and faith in the life after.[9]

I maintain that, not only is it correct to say that there is no singular universal principle to logically organize all moral values into one coherent value system as Berlin correctly maintains, but also that there is no principle to organize into one value system only mutually compatible moral values. Every value system in human history incorporates moral values that may point in opposite directions. For example, the same moral system may value both justice and mercy, even though they clearly conflict, as Berlin correctly maintains.[10] But the fact that they conflict only implies that assigning more importance to one entails less importance for the other; it does not imply both cannot be incorporated into the same system.

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[8] One may argue that, in Christian morality, all depends on whether if one practices these values for God; if done for the wrong reason, these values would have no merit at all. I maintain that this claim only shows that the love of God always has higher priority than all other values; it does not undermine my claim that, within Christian morality, forgiveness and mercy are still valued higher than are in the pagan morality.

[9] "Giving higher priorities" should be distinguished from what Charles Taylor calls "systematic priority," namely, "Answer all the demands that belong to domain A (say justice or benevolence) before you move to satisfy any demand of domain B (say, personal fulfillment)." (1997, 176) In my view, if one gives something a priority, either high or low, one has to more or less do it; otherwise, one gives it "no priority," rather than "low priority."

[10] One example of this conflict may present itself in the parents of the victim of a convicted murderer on death roll. Suppose the murderer is asking to be spared of his life. Should the parents forgive him or seek justice by pressing on the death penalty?

I believe that different value systems contain similar moral values[11]; what makes them different is that they assign different priorities to these values. For example, Christian morality presumably values mercy more than pagan morality does, and pagan morality values discipline more than Christian morality does, while all these values can be found, more or less, in each of these moral systems. If I am correct, the primary difference between moral systems is the difference of assigned priorities to values in these systems rather than the presence or absence of certain moral values.

III

In this section, I will present my interpretation of what is known as the complementariness of Confucianism and Daoism in Chinese culture. I will use it as an example to show that different value systems can share common values while prioritizing them in different ways, that each of these value systems has its own strengths as well as weaknesses, and that different value systems not only compete with, conflict with, but also can complement one another.

Confucianism and Daoism have often been seen as opposed to each other. For example, in his popular book *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-tsit Chan writes:

It is true that, while Confucianism emphasizes social order and an active life, Taoism [Daoism] concentrates on individual life and tranquility, thus suggesting that Taoism plays a secondary role. But, in reality, by opposing Confucian conformity with non-conformity and Confucian worldliness with a transcendental spirit, Taoism is a severe critic of Confucianism. In its doctrines

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[11] If we compare different cultural and value systems in terms "thin" enough, to borrow Michael Walzer's terminology, we will find that the values in these systems are by and large the same. See Walzer (1994). I go further than Walzer to look into different prioritizations within various value systems.

on government, on cultivation and preserving life, and on handling things,

Taoism is fully the equal of Confucianism. (1963, 136)

The opposition between Confucianism and Daoism is real. As Chan correctly points out, Confucianism emphasizes social order, conformity, active social life, and this-worldliness, whereas Daoism emphasizes spontaneity, non-conformity, tranquility, individual life, and transcendental inspiration. However, it would be wrong if we think that the moral values of these two systems are entirely exclusive of each other.

First, Confucianism and Daoism share many commonalities. As Joseph Adler maintains that,

Confucianism and Daoism have much in common. They both emphasize the goal of establishing a harmony of heaven, earth, and humanity. They both display a kind of thinking known as organicism, which defines things by their functional relationships to large wholes (like organs in organisms). And they both arose in the Warring States period as proposed solutions to the social and political chaos then gripping China. (2002, 43)

Much can be said of the commonalities between them. The values embraced by both Confucianism and Daoism range from harmony of the universe to thrifty in everyday living. In social philosophy, both Confucianism and Daoism oppose harsh government; they both hold that individuals should engage in self-cultivation; and they both value prudence as a virtue. If we compare Confucianism and Daoism on the one hand and some other world traditions like Christianity on the other, the commonalities between Confucianism and Daoism are even more salient. For example, they both embrace the idea of organist evolution

of the universe rather than appeal to a transcendental creator, and they both believe in the immanent Dao rather than a natural law bestowed by an external creator.

Second, while Confucianism and Daoism seem to have contrasting values, they are not mutually exclusive. It is not the case that Confucianism simply does not leave any room for such values as spontaneity, non-conformity, tranquility, individual life, and transcendental inspiration, nor is the case that Daoism leaves no room for such values as social order, conformity, an active social life, and this-worldliness. Even though Confucianism emphasizes the following of *li* (rules of propriety), it does recognize the need for spontaneity. For instance, Confucius says that "In dealing with things in the world the *jun zi* (gentleman) does not have to conform to anything, nor does one have to be debarred from doing anything. One only needs to do what is right (*yi*) 君 子 之 於 天 下 也 無 適 也 無 莫 也 義 之 與 比." (*Analects,* 4: 10) It can be argued that here Confucius recognizes that at least some kind of spontaneity is appropriate. Even though Confucius advocates the conformity of filial piety, he also indicates that sometimes non-conformity is desirable as evidenced, for example, in Chapter 15 of the *Classic of the Filial Piety*: "when one's father is not right, one must contend with him 故 當 不 義 則 子 不 可 以 不 爭 於 父." Even though Confucius is this-worldly in orientation, he never rules out the "*tian* 天" or "heaven" in his philosophical deliberation. Daoism, on the other hand, does not oppose social order and social life in this world; it just does not give them as much weight as Confucianism does.

Therefore, it makes sense to say that the difference between Confucianism and Daoism is not that one possesses values excluded by the other, but that they prioritize values differently within their systems. It is precisely because Confucianism and Daoism prioritize values differently that they realize alternative ways of life, and it is because they realize

alternative ways of life that they complement each other. We may say that two value systems complement one another if they both contribute to harmony in society by providing people with desirable alternative ways of life. A harmonious society is different from the society of the Platonic "single vision philosophy" in that the former allows the pursuit of diverse ways of life.[12]

Prioritizing a value may give a value system strength in one situation, but its correlative de-prioritization of a competing or opposing value may well be its weakness in another situation. The Confucian's prioritization of conscientiousness and persistence (忠 *zhong*) may be a strength in comparison with the flexible Daoist. But it is also a weakness in comparison with Daoism in circumstances where flexibility is needed. Unfortunately, human finitude dictates that we do not have absolute certainty as to what is ultimately superior. This is the ground for having both to play different roles and to complement each other in society.[13]

In the history of China, we can find numerous examples of the Confucian-Daoist complementariness. One such example is Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427). Tao was a conscientious Confucian scholar-official in the government for years before he retreated to a small village to pursue a Daoist life close to nature. Either way he led a fulfilled life. At either time he exemplifies certain values common to Confucianism and Daoism, yet different prioritizations led to different ways of life. The same person who is practically a Confucian may have her Daoist phase in life, and vice versa, similar to Rorty's promoter of social justice who may have his self-creative phase or even moment in life, and vice versa.

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[12] For a discussion of harmony, see "Toward a Harmonious Cosmos: Confucian Ideal of *He* for a Peaceful World," *Philosophy East & West,* forthcoming in October 2006.

[13] For more elaboration of the Confucian-Daoist complementarity, readers can see Li (1999), Chapter 6 "Religion: Multiple Participation versus Exclusionism."

IV

Now we have seen three models of alternative pursuits. Rorty's model presents two alternative pursuits of ideals, self-creation and human solidarity. Berlin's model presents two alternative ways of life as two mutually exclusive sets of moral values. The Confucian-Daoist complementarity model as I elaborated above presents two alternative ways of life as two overlapping systems with different prioritizations of values. I am not suggesting that Rorty's self-creation matches Berlin's pagan morality and the Daoist way of life, or that Rorty's human solidarity matches Berlin's Christian morality and Confucian way of life. I am suggesting, instead, that it is more accurate and informative to understand alternative ways or ideals of life as different configurations of values.

By "configuration of values" I mean the process to prioritize and assign importance to various values that an individual or a culture embraces. For example, Rorty's authors of the first group are those people who typically place self-creation and individual autonomy above human solidarity, whereas those in his second group typically place human solidarity and social justice above self-creation and autonomy.[14] Confucianism assigns more weight to social conformity than Daoism does. We can see why value configuration is necessary via Berlin. Berlin is right that there is tension between values that we cherish and that good values can oppose one another. His insight raises the question of how we can pursue desirable yet competing values. He also extends our horizon to set our sight on systems of values rather than discrete individual values. Life is never the pursuit of a single value. As we pursue values that compete or conflict with one another, we need to prioritize or rank them.

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[14] Membership in each of Rorty's groupings may be disputable. Here I am not concerned with the accuracy of his groupings.

Furthermore, choosing a particular way of life is to prioritize values in a particular way. Because some values are opposed, giving one value a high priority implies giving its opposing value a relatively low priority. A value configuration that ranks conformity high entails its ranking flexibility (non-conformity) low. Berlin's model is problematic, however, because it denies that conflicting values can be configured into one value system, and because it does not recognize different configurations of the same values. Rorty is right in suggesting that different alternative ways of life have their own merits and risks, that they do not have to be woven into a single vision, and that we should use them for different purposes (I would say that they have complementary functions). Rorty's insight helps us to lay to rest the perennial desire for a universal value system. But I think Rorty's characterization of the matter only shows us part of the picture; it does not present enough in helping us understand the nature of alternative ways of life. Borrowing the insights of Berlin and Rorty to interpret the Confucian-Daoist complementarity model, we can understand that alternative ways of life do not necessarily exclude one another's values, even though they configure values differently, that we cannot produce a better or superior value system simply by weaving alternative value systems, and that we can, and probably should, use alternative ways of life for different purposes as Rorty has insightfully suggested.[15]

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