CHAPTER EIGHT

GOD’S JUSTICE ON EARTH:
SITTILCHKEIT VERSUS THE ETHICAL STATE*

The Puzzle of “Divine Humanism”

Confucianism is well-known for its radical humanistic orientation. This tendency has found arguably its most forceful expression in the following statement in The Analects:

It is the human that can make the Way [of Heaven] great, and not the Way [of Heaven] that can make the human great.¹

Similarly, the Doctrine of the Mean, one of the four basic canons of Neo-Confucianism, states:

What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature. To follow human nature is called the Way [of Heaven]. Cultivating the Way (of Heaven) is called teaching. The Way [of Heaven] cannot be separated from us for a moment. What can be separated from us is not the Way (of Heaven).²

There is little doubt that these statements betray an “extreme” brand of humanism,³ or, in Weber’s terms, an extreme form of this-worldly orientation. In so doing, however, the statements confront us with an evident conceptual dilemma.

On the one hand, these statements indicate clearly that there exists “a purposive and caring Heaven” that is beyond and absolutely transcends the human world and thus acts as the ultimate arbiter of human affairs.⁴ In

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⁴ Tu, Centrality and Commonality, p. 9.
this context, the term “Heaven” in Chinese thought refers to the sum total of ultimate and highest truths about the universe and the human world, against which everything under heaven is to be judged and measured. The Confucian notion of the Way of Heaven, then, comes very close to the term “Truth” or “God” in religious and philosophical writings in the West and other parts of the world. On the other hand, however, we are also told that Heaven is dependent upon the human being, in the sense that it is through and only through human activities that the Way of Heaven manifests itself. But how can Heaven be both beyond and dependent upon human activities? How, after all, can we conceptualize the relationship between Heaven and the human world in this connection?

A standard answer to this paradox of Confucian humanism is provided by Tu Weiming in his well-known interpretation of The Doctrine of the Mean. What holds the key to this perplexity, according to Tu, is “the mutuality of Heaven and man” or what Mircea Eliade terms “the anthropocosmic unity.”5 Like the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Confucian mode of thinking is not “anthropocentric” in the sense of insisting that human nature is imparted by Heaven. In this regard, it is inconceivable from the Confucian perspective that “man can be alienated from Heaven in any essential way.”6 Yet, in sharp contrast to the “theocentric” orientation of the predominant religious trends in the West, Confucianism maintains that Heaven also charges the human “with the mission of bringing the cosmic transformation to its fruition.”7 Hence “the Way is nothing other than the actualization of true human nature” and “to know Heaven,” accordingly, is to penetrate deeply into the human’s “own ground of being.”8 In this light, since the Way of Heaven (tian dao) is identical with the way of human (ren dao), “the path to transcendence (heaven) is none other than the path of self-discovery.” The way to the outer is thus through the inner.9

5 Tu, Centrality and Commonality, p. 9.
6 Tu, Centrality and Commonality, p. 10.
7 Tu, Centrality and Commonality, p. 10 (emphasis added).
8 Tu, Centrality and Commonality, p. 10 (emphasis added).
9 Szekar Wan, “The Viability of Confucian Transcendence: Grasping with Tu Weiming’s Interpretation of Zhongyong,” in Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy 8/4 (Winter 2008), pp. 407–422. The problem with Tu’s “anthrocosmic” interpretation of Confucian humanism, as Wan has observed, is that it has the effect of actually reinforcing the Weberian characterization of Confucianism as a “cosmocentric” approach to the relation between God and the world. “Tu’s definition of Confucian transcendence is thoroughly immanentized,” since one logical inference from the identity of heaven and human nature is the identity of heaven, society, and nature—that is, the familiar microcosm/macrocosm scheme. No wonder then that Tu holds that the completion of the self necessarily implies