WHATEVER oversights Buddhists suffer concerning the moral law and human nature, Mou thinks the Tiantai thinkers were exactly right about buddhas’ relationship to ordinary people: even though buddhas differ from the rest of us in many ways, nevertheless in some respects they are “identical” to us.

And as it happens, Mou thinks, the great Song and Ming Confucians were arguing about the same kind of question as Nāgārjuna, the Yogācārin, Paramārtha and the Huayan line, and the Tiantai philosophers. Where the Buddhists disagreed about how we are or are not separate from buddhas, the Confucians split into camps over just the same sort of question about Heaven. Does Heaven simply surpass us utterly? Or is it also somehow inside us? Or maybe even somehow the same as us?

Put another way, both Buddhists and Confucians struggled among themselves over how the universe of objects, including creatures like us who have flesh-and-blood bodies and sensible intuition, is and is not related to what I will call “ultimate value.” By ultimate value I mean whatever a thinker supposes is the standard of maximal worth, namely buddhahood for Buddhists or Heaven for Confucians.

Mou thinks that in both the Buddhist and Confucian traditions, the orthodox teaching is that ordinary people and things are “paradoxically

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1 Mou sometimes refers to this as the relationship of the “immanent” (neizai 内在) and the “transcendent” (chaoyue 超越) (e.g. SJJ, 234; JSL, 340; cf. XT, 2; 224), and many Mou scholars refer to it in those terms too (e.g. Zheng Jiadong, Mou Zongsan; Fung, ‘Chaoyue neizai’ de misi). However, I prefer to avoid these words because I find they cause more confusion than they dispel. Over the centuries, too many authors have used them in so many deceptively similar ways that, in my experience, when we try to use them nowadays as terms of explanation, the conversation easily devolves into gaseous generality or mutual misunderstanding. Even Mou himself uses ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ with a good deal of slippage. Therefore in order to help us keep this discussion relatively concrete and focus squarely on the practical import of the metaphysical issues, I present the question chiefly in terms of ‘ultimate value’ and ‘the universe of objects’.

2 Once again, an authentically Buddhist or Confucian teaching would be one that accorded with the intention of the Buddha or the founding Confucian sages.
identical” (guijue de xiangji 謹謹的相即) to ultimate value. That is, even though we are imperfect in many ways, we could also say that we are actually “perfect” in a certain sense, namely that in order for ultimate value to exist at all, it must exist as the whole universe of objects, and in particular as ordinary people.  

Whatever Buddhists’ shortcomings, Mou thinks they have always outstripped Confucians in their facility for spelling out tricky relationships like this clearly. Of course Mou thinks that the best Confucians have always taught this sort of unity-amid-distinctness of humanity with ultimate value, but they have not expressed this relationship as clearly as Buddhists have. In matters of “philosophy,” Mou thinks Buddhists have always led the way for China. Already in the sixth century Zhiyi not only condensed his tradition’s definitive message into systematic form—something that Confucians did not even approach for another five hundred years—but he also sorted out and ranked all the contending interpretations of his tradition on formal grounds.

Now the Confucians of the Song and Ming never matched the theoretical comprehensiveness and clarity of the Buddhists, and they

3 Mou famously uses the term in this form in the context of his discussion of the “coincidence of virtue and happiness” (defu yizhi 德福一致) in the final chapter of Treatise on the Summum Bonum (TSL, 274, 305, 325). Also particularly relevant is his discussion of “identity” (ji 靜) as the “original insight” (yuanchu zhi dongjian 原初洞見) of Tiantai which opens the way to the Perfect Theory (FB, 598–600) and his equation of relationship of virtue and happiness with that of the “buddhas’ original body” (fo de benshen 佛的本身) and “the existence of dharmas” (SJJ, 283).

4 Some readers will be reminded of mid-century Chicago religionist Mircea Eliade with his stress on the coincidentia oppositorum, in which the ‘profane’ and the ‘sacred’ are defined in opposition to each other but are ultimately discovered to be a unity.

5 TSL, 354; SJJ, 354.

6 KL, 432; FB, 1023; TSL, xii.

7 SYYL, 153.