

Article

What Is the Meaning of Reproduction for Individuals: An Attempted Explanation Based on Confucianism

Mimi Pi

Department of Philosophy, Capital Normal University, Beijing 100089, China; 6764@cnu.edu.cn

Abstract: In a modern world dominated by individualism, reproduction has become a difficult choice for individuals. The traditional reasons for reproduction have lost their appeal. For individuals, the meaning of reproduction has become a question. Confucian understandings of the universe and the individual provide insight to address the challenge. Dong Zhongshu's theory of "humans are born of tian" and the concept of deriving benevolence from Heaven deeply appreciate the cosmic virtue of natural generation, establishing a meaningful connection between Heaven and humanity, and offering a cosmic perspective to understand the meaning of human life beyond blood relations. Mencius's theory of human nature opens up multiple possibilities for the establishment of individual subjectivity, alleviating the potential tension in parent–child relationships from an individualistic perspective. Confucian rituals, through traceable bloodline genealogies, imbue individual life with meaning, and within this context, reproduction is given significance.

Keywords: individual; reproduction; Confucianism; humans are born of tian

1. Introduction

Today's world is witnessing a global decline in fertility rates. Though human populations have experienced fluctuations in previous times due to specific events, such as diseases, wars, and climate change, the current global decline in fertility rates seems to be unusual in human history.¹ The decline in fertility rates is generally considered a phenomenon that requires explanation by social science. Social scientists have indeed found various reasons, such as the popularization of contraception, increased educational levels of women, higher costs of raising children, changing ideas on child-rearing, and so on. However, does this mean that if solutions are found for these explicit causes, fertility rates will necessarily be reversed?

It should be noted that behind the global decline in fertility rates lies a significant transformation in people's attitude toward reproduction. It seems that all the previous reasons for having children are no longer compelling to modern people. For example, in China, a famous reason for reproduction comes from Mencius as follows: "There are three things which are unfilial and to have no posterity is the greatest of them" 不孝有三，无后为大。 It seems to view reproduction as a duty related to filial piety. Therefore, not having children was seen as a failure to fulfill one's duty to parents. However, in modern China, with the process of urbanization, an increasing number of young people choose to leave their parents and move to new places to live. As a result, they can hardly fulfill filial duties according to the traditional Confucian way. Additionally, the May Fourth Movement, which took place in the 1920s in China, almost destroyed the foundation of Confucianism in Chinese society. Filial piety as a representative Confucian ethic was strongly criticized by intellectuals as a corrupt and backward morality, leading to the stigmatization of filial



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piety in modern China. Therefore, if filial piety is questionable, the ethical duty associated with it is also doubtful. Moreover, in the 21st century, when more Chinese are exposed to western individualism and liberalism, they have experienced a huge mind shift. For the young generation born after the 1990s, personal value rather than collective value, individual interests rather than community interests, freedom rather than responsibility, and rights rather than duties are what are truly worth pursuing.

From an individual perspective, reproduction is no longer a social norm that must be conformed to but has become a personal choice. Although the pressure from social norms has not entirely disappeared, individuals' choices regarding reproduction are now respected and accepted by society. Furthermore, with the development of feminism, which has distinguished and separated motherhood from the female identity, women are no longer bound by the role of motherhood and can seek to shape a more independent self.² With the combined effect of these trends, human reproduction is losing its sufficient reason for individuals.

Although some medical studies have provided evidence of the benefits of having children,³ there is more evidence showing that procreation brings significant risks to the parents, particularly the mother, both physically and psychologically. Even in a pro-natalist society, considering the unavoidable costs of health, money, and time associated with childbirth, procreation seems to have become a losing proposition for individuals. Therefore, if the solution is simply to rebuild social norms or offer policy support to encourage procreation, without providing philosophical meaning for reproduction, the necessity of reproduction may remain doubtful. If the continuation of humanity is still believed necessary, then before exploring new reproductive technologies (such as in vitro fertilization), discussing the philosophical significance of reproduction remains a necessary and important issue. Of course, this is a challenge requiring the participation of various intellectual resources. The traditional justifications for reproduction are almost always framed from a non-individualistic perspective, such as perpetuating family honor, fulfilling the duty of filial piety, or accomplishing the divine commandments of God. Can Confucianism provide a new understanding of the meaning of reproduction for individuals?⁴

2. Shengsheng 生生 as a Virtue

The term *shengsheng* 生生, which originates from the Confucian classic the *Book of Changes* 易经, is an important term for understanding the Confucian view of life. It says the following:

The reciprocal process of yin and yang is called the Dao. That which allows the Dao to continue to operate is human goodness, and that which allows it to bring things to completion is human nature. The benevolent see it and call it benevolence, and the wise see it and call it wisdom. It functions for the common folk on a daily basis, yet they are unaware of it. This is why the Dao of the noble man is a rare thing! It is manifested in benevolence and hidden within its functioning. It arouses a myriad of things but does not share the anxiety of the Sages. As replete with virtue and great enterprise, the Dao is indeed perfect. It is because the Dao exists in such rich abundance that we refer to it as the "great enterprise". It is because the Dao brings renewal day after day that we refer to it here as "replete virtue". In its capacity to produce and reproduce, we call it "change" (Lynn 1994, pp. 53–54).

一阴一阳之谓道，继之者善也，成之者性也。仁者见之谓之仁，知者见之谓之知，百姓日用不知；故君子之道鲜矣！显诸仁，藏诸用，鼓万物而不与圣人同忧，盛德大业至矣哉！富有之谓大业，日新之谓盛德。生生之谓易。

Roger T. Ames translated *shengsheng* as “the generative procreativity of life itself” (Ames 2021, p. 393). Although this term was familiar to ancient Confucian scholars, they did not regard *shengsheng* as a philosophical concept of particular importance. The Confucian scholar Kang Youwei (1858–1927) from the late Qing dynasty started to highlight the significance of *shengsheng* when comparing Confucianism with other religions in the world. In his work, *Kangzi neiwaipian* 康子内外篇 (*Kang Youwei's Essays on Internal and External Matters*), written in 1886, Kang Youwei stated the following:

Nowadays there are many types of civilization in the world: in China, there is Confucianism, which has been passed down since the time of Two Emperors and Three Sovereigns⁵. In India, there is Buddhism, a self-originating religion. In Europe, there is Christianity. In the Islamic regions, there is Islam. There are also many other civilizations too numerous to count. However, I believe all these civilizations can be categorized into two types (Kang 2007, vol. 21, p. 103).

According to Kang Youwei, one type of civilization is characterized by “abstinence from meat and marriage, daily worship of the religious founder, rejection of the secular professions and the pursuit of knowledge” (Kang 2007, vol. 21, p. 103). Therefore, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all belong to this category, which transcends secular life. The other is characterized by “establishing the state, governing the people, with relationships between ruler and subjects, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, with the professions of scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants; with the practices of ghosts, gods, sorcery, and offerings; as well as the teachings of poetry, books, rites and music” (Kang 2007, vol. 21, p. 103). Confucianism was categorized by him into the latter type, that is, a civilization closely related to the mundane world.

As one of the earliest intellectuals in late Qing China who had learned about Western civilization, Kang Youwei was aware of the non-religious feature of Confucianism. There is no supreme deity in Confucianism, and its teachings are primarily concerned with human relations and daily lives. In Kang Youwei's view, this characteristic was not a defect of Confucianism, but rather its strength, as it represented a way of living that aligned with human nature. Therefore, by comparing Confucianism with other religions in the world, Kang Youwei emphasized the significance of *shengsheng* as follows: “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is called *shengsheng*. *Shengsheng* is what is meant by “change”. The Sage only speaks of *shengsheng*, and the principle of the world is contained in the *shengsheng*” (Kang 2007, vol. 2, p. 137). Although he does not provide a further explanation of why *shengsheng* is so important, it can be inferred that with its affirmation of life and emphasis on the human world, *shengsheng* has expressed the fundamental spirit of Confucianism.

But how does Confucianism, as a non-theistic civilization, establish its value and meaning system in secular life? Or, in other words, what special significance and value does *shengsheng* present? In the work *Chunqiu dongshixue* 春秋董氏学 (*Dong Zhongshu's study of the Spring and Autumn Annals*), Kang compared the teachings of Confucius and Laozi, pointing out a major difference between Confucianism and Daoism as follows: “Laozi sees Heaven and Earth as not benevolent, while Confucius sees Heaven and Earth as benevolent. This is the fundamental difference between them. Confucius takes benevolence from Heaven; therefore, benevolence is the root of the Dao” (Kang 2007, vol. 2, p. 389). Both Confucius and Laozi lived in the same natural world, in terms of personal living experience, and they both observed the same natural phenomena, such as the climate changes, the seasonal cycles, and the flourishing and declining of life. However, their feelings and judgments about these natural phenomena greatly differ. Laozi took a more neutral view of the operations of the natural world, not believing that the universe had any particular preference for humanity or even for the creation of life. He, thus, concluded the following: “Heaven and earth are not benevolent; they treat all things

as straw dogs". On the other hand, Confucius deeply valued life as "the great virtue of Heaven and Earth".

In order to explain the reason behind the difference, we need to return to the *Book of Changes*. In the chapter the Great Appendix, there is a phrase as follows: "The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is called "generation". 天地之大德曰生 Wang Bi (227–249) interpreted it as follows: "It gives life but makes no purposeful effort to do so. Thus, it is able to bring about life constantly. This is why the text refers to it in terms of its "generative virtue" (Lynn 1994, p. 77). According to Wang's explanation, the reason why the act of Heaven and Earth giving birth and nurturing all the beings can be called "virtue" is that, in addition to granting life to all things, Heaven and Earth do not interfere with them, allowing all the beings to follow their inherent nature without disturbance, which reflects an obvious Daoist perspective. However, Kong Yingda (574–648), a famous Confucian scholar from the Tang dynasty interpreted the phrase differently. In his annotation, Kong wrote the following: "The following sentences are meant to demonstrate that the Sages share the virtue of Heaven and Earth, which is to give birth to all things. It says that the great virtue of Heaven and Earth lies in their constant generation. If the generation is not constant, then their virtue would not be great. Because they constantly give birth to all things, it is called great virtue" (Wang and Kong 1990).

Though the phrase only contains one *sheng* character, Kong Yingda highlighted the word "*changsheng*" 常生 (bring about life constantly) from Wang Bi's commentary, pointing out that the reason this behavior is considered a "great virtue" is because it gives life constantly to all things, allowing them to perpetuate and renew. If life were given only once, it would not be considered a great virtue. Therefore, according to Kong Yingda, the great virtue of Heaven and Earth is actually *shengsheng*, that is, to bring about life constantly.

However, why can "bring about life constantly" be regarded as a virtue? This requires understanding in conjunction with the following sentences: "The great treasure of the Sage is called his "position". The means by which one preserves this position we call "benevolence"; the means by which he gathers people to him we call "resources". The regulation of resources, the rectification of pronouncements, and his preventing the people from doing wrong we call "righteousness"" (Lynn 1994, p. 77).

Kong Yingda explained the following:

The great treasure of the Sage is called his position; this means that position is a place of use, and treasure is a useful thing. A Sage who occupies a lofty position can apply it widely without bounds; hence, it is called a great treasure. The means by which one preserves this position we call "benevolence", meaning that the Sage guards his position with trust and love. The means by which he gathers people to him, we call "resources", meaning that to gather people, resources are needed. The Sage manages the resources with moderation, speaks with correct words, and guides people with justice, forbidding them from doing wrong things. This is righteousness, meaning acting in accordance with what is appropriate (Wang and Kong 1990, p. 168).

言圣人大可宝贵者在于位耳，位是有用之地，宝是有用之物。若以居盛位，能广用无疆，故称大宝也。‘何以守位曰仁’者，言圣人何以保守其位，必信仁爱，故言‘曰仁’也。‘何以聚人曰财’者，言何以聚集人众，必须财物，故言‘曰财’也。言圣人治理其财，用之有节，正定号令之辞，出之以理，禁约其民为非僻之事，勿使行恶，是谓之义。义，宜也。言以此行之，而得其宜也。

From Kong's explanation, we know that the reason the Sage gains a high position is because he aligns himself with the virtues of Heaven and Earth, giving life to all beings. But Heaven and Earth are silent. The moving of the clouds, the falling of the rain, the changes

of the seasons, and the shining of the sun are all natural phenomena, which can hardly be considered as virtue. It is only with the appearance of the Sage, who used benevolence, resources, and righteousness to enable the people to reproduce, gather, and prosper, that a value judgment is made about his actions. Therefore, according to Kong Yingda, it is the Sage who truly deserves the high position and is worthy of the great virtue. The Sage, in his self-proclaimed role, is merely imitating Heaven and Earth, thereby gaining recognition for the great virtue of Heaven and Earth. It can be seen that the Confucian concept of the *shengsheng* is not just a praise of the impartial nurturing and life-giving power of Heaven and Earth but indeed includes a preference for the prosperity of humanity.

Since *shengsheng* is considered a virtue possessed by Heaven and Earth as well as the Sage, then how is it related to ordinary people? The Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) from the Han dynasty once viewed *shengsheng* as benevolence 仁. Benevolence is a core concept in Confucianism, which usually refers to the ultimate human virtue. However, Dong Zhongshu regarded Heaven as the source of this virtue. In his work *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (*Luxuriant Gems of Spring and Autumn Annals*), there is a passage describing the manifestation of Heaven's benevolence:

The beauty of benevolence lies in Heaven. Heaven is benevolent. Heaven nurtures all beings, transforms and gives them life, nourishes and completes them; its work never ends, and when one cycle ends, another begins (Su 2002, p. 329).

仁之美者在于天。天，仁也。天覆育万物，既化而生之，有养而成之，事功无已，终而复始。

According to Dong Zhongshu, benevolence is a judgment on the behavior of Heaven, which nurtures and gives life to all beings. Unlike the Daoist view of Heaven, which gives life initially but does not intervene further, Dong Zhongshu described Heaven with a clear sense of responsibility and nurturing consciousness. He distinguished between the giving of life (*huasheng*) 化生 and the nurturing of life (*yangcheng*) 养成. Heaven not only gives life to beings but also nurtures and completes them. But why is this behavior considered benevolence? Because nurturing and giving life to all things is not compulsory for Heaven's existence. Just as the Earth had existed and functioned for billions of years before life appeared on it, life is not essential for the Earth's existence. Yet, Heaven still willingly engages in this nurturing and life-giving process without any self-interested purpose, tirelessly repeating the cycle. Such a great and selfless act can be called nothing but benevolence. According to Dong Zhongshu, it is by receiving and experiencing Heaven's benevolence that the human virtue of benevolence emerges.

From a modern perspective, this argument of deriving human virtue from Heaven is a typical example of the ancient Chinese way of thinking. However, when Dong Zhongshu spoke of human benevolence as derived from Heaven, it was not just an analogy but actually an attempt to establish an ontology of humanity. Humans are born of their parents, and this fact does not fundamentally explain where humans come from: A child is born from the parents, but the parents also have their parents—if tracing upward, where is the starting point? Dong Zhongshu offered an innovative explanation as follows: "Humans are born by tian/Heaven". He said the following:

It is not humans who provide human life, but Heaven that creates humans. Those who give birth to humans are originally from Heaven, and Heaven is also the ancestor of humans. The human body is shaped by the pattern of Heaven; the human spirit and vitality are shaped by Heaven's will, thus becoming benevolent; human virtues and actions are shaped by the principles of Heaven, thus becoming righteous. The likes and dislikes of humans are shaped according to Heaven's warmth and clarity; the joys and anger of humans are shaped by

Heaven's cold and heat; the commands of humans are shaped by the four seasons of Heaven. Human life has responses of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, corresponding to spring, autumn, winter, and summer. The response of spring is anger; the response of autumn is joy; the response of summer is sorrow; the response of winter is happiness. The counterpart of Heaven lies in humans. The emotional nature of humans is derived from Heaven. Therefore, it is said that the "mandate" comes from the call of Heaven (Su 2002, p. 318).

Dong Zhongshu was not making a creation myth by presenting Heaven as a personal, willful deity, nor did he intend to deny the biological fact that humans are born from their parents. He was attempting to explain why humans manifest as beings with specific physical forms, virtues, preferences, emotions, and dispositions. How are these characteristics that define human nature formed? Although the physical beginning of individual life starts with the parents' conception, Dong Zhongshu revealed another side of the issue: the human body, virtue, preferences, emotions, and feelings are not solely shaped and determined by the parents. In this sense, they do not belong to humans but to Heaven—a force beyond human control. This means that neither humanity as a whole nor the individual person can be created by humans themselves. Therefore, by putting forward "Humans are born by tian", Dong Zhongshu provided a broader understanding of human life; while the contribution of the parents in the generation of individual life is undeniable, individual life cannot be regarded as the creation of the parents. This is because, beyond the parents, there is a more fundamental force that shapes the form of humans. Thus, the parents are actually playing a mediating role between Heaven and humanity. Dong Zhongshu further explained the following:

Humans receive their mandate from Heaven and take benevolence from Heaven, thus becoming benevolent. Therefore, it is through receiving respect from Heaven that humans come to have familial relationships, such as those of father, elder brother, and younger brother. They also have hearts filled with loyalty, trust, compassion, and kindness, actions governed by propriety, righteousness, integrity, and humility, as well as governance based on the discernment of right and wrong and adherence to order. Their culture and principles shine brilliantly and deeply, accumulating vast knowledge and a broad understanding. Only human virtue can be in harmony with Heaven (Su 2002, pp. 329–30).

人之受命于天也，取仁于天而仁也。是故人之受命天之尊，父兄子弟之亲，有忠信慈惠之心，有礼义廉让之行，有是非逆顺之治，文理灿然而厚，积知广大而有博，唯人道为可以参天。

This idea establishes a more direct connection between Heaven and humanity, which might seem to weaken the importance of paternal bloodlines. However, it should also be noted that by placing Heaven above humans, Dong Zhongshu highlighted the limitations of humanity: the emergence of life, of humans, and of individuals is not purely human. In this sense, the act of parents giving birth to children is not simply an act driven by pure self-interest or the fulfillment of personal desires; rather, it is based on the individual's understanding of their place in the cosmos and the life cycle, the recognition and emulation of Heaven's benevolence, and the acceptance of the virtuous responsibilities that Heaven has entrusted to them.

3. A Way to Rebuild Subjectivity of an Individual

As Zhao Tingyang has pointed out, the idea of the individual is the most important invention of modern society. An individual is a new identity obtained after abandoning one's family, social relationships, and community (see Zhao 2009, p. 105). According to

individualism, even in close relationships, like that between parents and children, each individual is independent and complete.

Alen Macfarlane, in *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family Property and Social Transition*, discussed the situation of English families in the 13th century when individualism was growing:

It has already been suggested that, in practice, the old people did not live with the young, and that at marriage, the families normally separated... What is more extraordinary, and complements this, is the fact that it was felt necessary to draw up a lengthy written contract or maintenance agreement if co-existence was contemplated. In return for surrendering their individual and personal property rights to a child, the parents asked for very specific rights in return. It is clear that without legal protection in a written document, they could have been ejected from a property that was no longer their own. These maintenance agreements were then registered in the court roll. It is as if parent and child were strangers bargaining; Raftis comments that maintenance agreements could just as readily be made with in-laws or strangers; and the form was identical (Macfarlane 1978, pp. 141–42).

According to the description of McFarlane in 13th-century England, even the physiological fact of giving birth to children did not naturally grant the parents' ownership and control over their children. Likewise, children could not naturally expect their parents to provide continuous economic support for them. The care and nurture that parents provided to their children before adulthood was seen as a temporary responsibility, while maintaining a long-term relationship between them required the signing of a contract. In such a relationship, parents and children are conceived as two independent individuals who inherently possessed independent "selves". Then why would an independent individual allow another independent stranger to invade his life and provide care for them over an extended period? In 13th-century English society, due to social norms or considerations, such as elderly care, the necessity of reproduction seemed not to be a doubt. However, when procreation is no longer a compulsory social norm and does not offer significant benefits to an individual's life, for adults who are economically and mentally self-sufficient, what is the need to accept the invasion of a stranger? Therefore, if taking the individualism to the extreme, the parent–child relationship would inevitably become a relationship of competing interests, making it difficult for them to coexist symbiotically.

However, if we realize that this is only one understanding of a parent–child relationship, then different explanations can be taken into consideration. The modern understanding of the individual is based on "atomism", whereas a contrasting understanding comes from Confucianism. Many scholars have pointed out that the Confucian "self" is a "relational self".⁶ Confucianism does not conceive of an independent individual detached from all human relationships. The identity and duty of an individual are defined within a specific community and human relationships. Also, the Confucian "self" is not a fixed or static status but is gradually developed and presented over time. Mencius's theory of human nature is a typical example of the Confucian "self in process".

In the pre-Qin period, many scholars were concerned with the issue of human nature. One dominant understanding is presented by Mencius's opponent Gaozi as "The desires for food and sex are our nature" (Van Norden 2009, p. 70). According to his understanding, human nature is neither good nor evil, because it is simply the way humans naturally manifest. "Human nature is like swirling water. Make an opening for it on the eastern side, then it flows east. Make an opening for it on the western side, then it flows west. Human nature not distinguishing between good and not good is like water not distinguishing between east and west" (Van Norden 2009, p. 69). However, Mencius offered a different definition of human nature as follows: "The mouth in relation to flavors, the eyes in relation to sights,

the ears in relation to notes, the nose in relation to odors, and the four limbs in relation to comfort—these are matters of human nature, but they are also fated. Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as “human nature” (Van Norden 2009, p. 88). In Mencius’s view, delicious food, beautiful scenery, pleasant sounds, and delightful scents—things that provide enjoyment to humans—depend on specific conditions for their acquisition and cannot be determined by human will. What can be decided and achieved entirely by the individual is what constitutes human nature.

Furthermore, Mencius does not see human nature as a fixed, actual status, but rather as a potentiality to be realized. He argues that everybody inherently has the sprout of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. It is the duty of humans to fill them all out. “This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential” (Van Norden 2009, p. 72). In general, Mencius interprets human nature as something that a human can realize by fully exercising their autonomy and needs to be realized during a process.

Meng Wentong (1894–1968), a Confucian scholar in modern China, highly praised Mencius’s developing perspective on human nature. He said the following:

Mencius’s view on human nature is derived from Confucius. Dong Zhongshu was somewhat skeptical of Confucius’s views. He compared human nature to seedlings and eggs and goodness to rice and chicks. He argued that while seedlings could become rice and eggs could hatch into chicks, a seedling was not rice, and an egg was not a chick. He believed that human nature could be good but only with the teachings of a Sage. Han Ying’s view was more profound than Dong Zhongshu’s. He believed that although a seedling was not rice and an egg was not a chick, a seedling would inevitably become rice, and an egg would inevitably hatch into a chick. The Song dynasty Confucian scholars, while recognizing the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, tended to have a predestined view of human nature, while Han Ying had a developmental view. Mencius’s emphasis on nurturing Qi highlighted the importance of development, while Confucius’s saying that human nature was similar but habits differed also points to the need for development (Meng 2006, pp. 21–22).

Meng offers a significant explanation on Mencius’s theory of human nature, highlighting its developmental tendency. According to him, Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty had a somewhat misguided reading of Mencius. They believed that human nature possessed an innate form (the nature endowed by Heaven or the nature of supreme goodness), and an individual’s moral duty was to restore this original state of supreme goodness. However, Meng argued that Mencius did not propose an innate goodness of human nature. Instead, the goodness of human nature gradually unfolds throughout the process of a person’s life. Without this process, the notion of human nature’s goodness would be an empty proposition.

This developmental perspective to understand human nature can be applied to enrich our understanding of “self”. Mencius’s theory of human nature requires individuals to achieve self-realization in terms of morality. When we consider self-fulfillment in other aspects, the developmental view is still important. The “self” imagined by individualism is an independent, clearly defined, yet closed idea. The overly clear boundaries make it difficult for the self to open up to other possibilities, and, thus, the arrival of a child is often seen as a disruption or offense to these boundaries. The “self” is not predetermined but waits to be created and realized by the subject. However, from the perspective of Mencius’s understanding of human nature, “self” is not predetermined but waits to be created and realized by the subject. Therefore, a child is not an object in conflict with the individual as a mature subject; instead, it is a possibility deeply embedded in the life of

the mature individual and an important component of the mature individual's subjectivity. The arrival of a child is understood as the manifestation of this possibility at a particular stage of an individual's life, rather than an intrusion by a stranger.

Does this mean that childbirth should be an obligatory choice rather than an optional one for individuals? Indeed, from the perspective of ancient Confucianism, having children is considered a natural and fundamental duty for all adults. Human nature must be realized through ethical life, and the most fundamental relationship in an ethical life is the parent–child relationship. Therefore, without childbirth, ethical life would be difficult to continue. As for those who, for special reasons, cannot have or have lost children, they are seen as vulnerable groups who should be supported and cared for.⁷ However, in modern society, where values are diverse and lifestyles are varied, this explanation has not been considered persuasive and could even be accused of moral coercion. Therefore, in the modern context, Mencius's understanding of human nature can be seen as an argument and defense for childbirth as an optional rather than obligatory choice, as it largely resolves the deep tension between the parent–child relationship as independent individuals.

However, it must be noted that reproduction as an option in personal life is still different from other options. Individualism grants modern individuals' significant freedom of choice. People can choose things such as travel destinations, movies to watch, and sports to engage in based on their free will, with each choice opening up new possibilities in their lives. These choices do not break the individual's subjectivity. Rather, they extend it while maintaining the core of the original subjectivity. However, the arrival of a new life not only signifies a shift in one's identity in family and social life but also breaks the original subjectivity, creating a new "self"—a self that has to coexist with the new life.

What is the significance of establishing this new "self"? Zhang Xianglong, when discussing the chance of the emergence of "family reverence", suggests that when a person transitions from being a child to a parent, "this experience of nurturing, which mirrors their own experience of being nurtured, becomes a recurring and renewed situation. In the extended time-consciousness of humanity, it suddenly evokes a primal memory, one that is long-lasting, even if implicit, intertwining the memories of past parenting and present parenthood, bringing them into resonance" (Zhang 2017, p. 105). This process, which seems repetitive but is in fact renewing, is crucial for the establishment of the caregiver's subjectivity. Before becoming a caregiver, everyone was once a recipient of care. The self that formed before becoming a parent was shaped by the experience of being nurtured. However, after becoming a caregiver, this once-shaped individual gains the opportunity to shape a new subjectivity. It is through this transformation of identity and relationship, rather than through rational cognition, that this part of subjectivity is activated. Therefore, many parents, when talking about their parenting experiences, describe it as a process of healing the "former self". From the perspective of Mencius's theory of human nature, the transition from being nurtured to becoming a nurturer is not just the opening of a new possibility in one's life, but also an opportunity for the reshaping of one's subjectivity.

4. A Possible Way to Face Infinity

Even recognizing that children are not in conflict with the parents' selves, but an important opportunity to expand parents' life scope, still this possibility is not appealing for many people. Children inevitably inherit their parents' genes, which makes them like their parents to a certain extent. But there will certainly be aspects of the children that surpass the parents' expectations and control. This is what Emmanuel Levinas referred to as "there is no expectation that can represent it, or, as people would say today, plan for it" (Levinas 2016, p. 245). From a philosophical view, choosing to have a child is a venture for an individual toward infinity and uncertainty. It means that an originally self-sufficient

and independent self has to face an uncontrollable future that cannot be properly planned, which may cause anxiety and fear. If a child is like an infinite abyss lurking in the future, unable to be fully planned and controlled, while the choice of whether to have children is something that can be planned, then when facing this infinite abyss, why not choose a more cautious way to avoid the risk? What could give one the courage to take the leap?

In fact, when reproductive freedom is entrusted to the individual, any rational comfort or persuasion is unlikely to alleviate the individual's doubts and anxieties about it. Kierkegaard's idea of "infinite resignation" might offer a solution. It asks one to "renounce something, to renounce its possibility within the finite" (Kierkegaard 2014, p. 52). However, Kierkegaard's infinite resignation is aimed at achieving the leap of faith: "Only in infinite resignation can I clearly discern my eternal validity, and only after infinite resignation do we have the right to hope, through the power of faith, to grasp existence" (Kierkegaard 2014, p. 52). In a disenchanted modern world, such a leap remains unachievable.

Reproductive choice is indeed an important experience of infinity for the individual, but there is an even more important and unavoidable experience of infinity—death. In ancient times, people's fear of death was comforted through religion, while in modern society, where science has dispelled religion, such methods have lost their efficacy, making death the greatest void that individuals have to face. To address the fear of death, Confucianism has developed a unique approach. In *The Book of Rites* (Liji), there is a discussion between Confucius and his disciple Zai Wo about the significance of sacrificial rites:

Zai Wo said the following: "I have heard of the names of ghosts and spirits, but I do not know what they mean". Confucius said the following: "Qi is the fullness of the spirit, and po is the fullness of the ghost. The union of the ghost and the spirit is the highest form of teaching. All living beings must die, and death must return to the earth; this is called the ghost. The bones and flesh decay below, while the yin becomes wild earth. Their qi rises above and becomes bright, producing a clear, sorrowful, and melancholic atmosphere. This is the essence of all things and the manifestation of the spirit. By using the essence of things, we establish limits, and with the name of the ghost and spirit, we govern the common people and cause the masses to fear and be respectful" (Zheng and Kong 2008, pp. 1832–34).

宰我曰：“吾闻鬼神之名，不知其所谓。”子曰：“气也者，神之盛也。魄也者，鬼之盛也。合鬼与神，教之至也。众生必死，死必归土，此之谓鬼。骨肉毙于下，阴为野土。其气发扬于上，为昭明，焄蒿凄怆，此百物之精也，神之著也。因物之精，制为之极，明命鬼神，以为黔首则，百众以畏，万民以服。”

Confucius clearly defined what "spirits and ghosts" were. In his view, "ghosts" referred to the physical bodies buried underground after death, while "spirits" referred to the ethereal "qi" that rose above after death. All living beings had both "po" and "qi"; the former could be compared to the material aspect of life, while the latter could be likened to the spiritual aspect. It may be difficult for modern people to understand the concept of "qi" (usually translated as vital force or force), but it was a widely accepted concept in the pre-Qin period, a spirit that was not personal but rather akin to the spirit of physics.⁸ According to Confucius, the Sage first established the names of the ghosts and spirits based on an understanding of the principles of life and the universe in order to receive the souls and spirits and teach the people to respect and fear. But this teaching of respect is insufficient to distinguish Confucianism from the influence of primitive shamanism. Confucius then emphasized the further innovation of the Sage:

The Sage found this insufficient, so he built palaces, established ancestral temples, and set up rituals to distinguish between close and distant relationships. He

taught people to return to the past and never forget their origins. The people's respect and obedience came from this, so they obeyed the Sage's words quickly. After the *qi* and *po* were established, the Sage repaid them with two forms of rites: to construct morning rites, burn incense, offer fragrant herbs, and present them with solemn light, which is the way to repay the *qi*; to offer millet and rice, show the liver, lungs, head, and heart, intersperse with libations of wine, and add fragrance, which is the way to repay the *po*. The people are taught to love each other, and the feelings of the upper and lower levels are engaged, which is the highest form of ritual. Through the rituals, the gentleman could return to the ancient times and renew himself, not forgetting where he came from. Therefore, he would show his respect, express his feelings, exert his utmost effort, and diligently serve to repay his parents, not daring to fall short (Zheng and Kong 2008, pp. 1835–36).

圣人以是为未足也，筑为宫室，设为宫祧，以别亲疏远迩。教民反古复始，不忘其所由生也。众之服自此，故听且速也。二端既立，报以二礼：建设朝事，燔燎膋芻，见以萧光，以报气也。此教众反始也。荐黍稷，羞肝、肺、首、心，见间以侠觶，加以郁鬯，以报魄也。教民相爱，上下用情，礼之至也。君子反古复始，不忘其所由生也。是以致其敬，发其情，竭力从事，以报其亲，不敢弗尽也。

Why did the Sage “distinguish between close and distant relationships”? His aim was to “teach people to return to the past and never forget their origins”. Returning to the past does not refer to a direct communication between the descendants and their ancestors, but through these rites, the descendants can establish a traceable connection to the origins of their lives. The sacrificial rituals, which are based on real blood relations, give extraordinary significance to human lineage, enabling the living descendants to see their own life as part of a traceable bloodline, with an origin and an endpoint. This endpoint is not a transcendental realm beyond the secular world but is within the bloodline chain presented through the rituals. “Returning to the past and never forgetting the origins” not only provides the living with a perspective to understand the origins of their lives but also shows how their individual lives will be understood and remembered by future generations.⁹

However, according to *The Book of Rites*, the emperor could build seven ancestral temples, with five feudal lords, three high-ranking officials, and one scholar, and common people could only offer sacrifices in their bedrooms. Although the number of ancestors being honored may vary, there are limits. This means that individuals cannot trace the complete bloodline of their life origins through the sacrificial rites, and not every ancestor will be worshiped in the ritual. However, this does not prevent individuals from gaining a holistic sense of their life origins through this ritual. It also does not hinder each ancestor's meaning in the bloodline from being understood. For those at the end of the chain of life, every link earlier in the chain is indispensable; without the previous generations, this individual life would not have come into being. Therefore, the central spirit of the rites is “repayment”, not just to the ancestors in the temples but to all ancestors. Of course, an implicit premise here is that Confucianism holds an optimistic view of life. The living repays their ancestors because they cherish their own lives. For the countless ordinary individuals living in this world, who will eventually depart, they will intuitively see that their life did not emerge from nothing and return to nothing, like a flickering light that appears and vanishes in the dark wilderness. Instead, it was lit through a series of life events. The lighting of this new light is a tribute to all the lights of the past that have already gone out, and the meaning of their existence will be manifested in the lighting of the next light.

Thus, Confucianism views life as continuous and holistic. It uses sacrificial rituals to remind people that the subjectivity that a mature individual believes he possesses is supported within a much broader time and space. Without the prior chain of life, this

independent life would not have appeared. Every individual life is certainly unpredictable, with its own talents, character, and potential, but this contingency does not shake Confucianism's positive attitude toward new life itself. From a perspective that transcends the limitations of individual existence, the appearance of new life is a tribute to the past life journey, and the search for one's place in the life chain gives the individual the courage to face infinity.

5. Conclusions

Until now, we have proposed Confucian arguments to support the significance of reproduction from three aspects. All of these arguments share an understanding of "self" as being relational and developmental. Dong Zhongshu's interpretation of the relationship between Heaven and humanity connects individual virtue to a broader universe, revealing the hidden connection between individual life and the cosmos. Mencius's theory of human nature proposes a self in process and development, opening up more possibilities to rebuild the subjectivity of the individual. Confucian sacrificial rituals offer the individuals the opportunity to view the "self" through a long ancestral lineage, allowing the light and transient individual life to acquire weight through the remembrance of their ancestors. And this Confucian understanding of "self" greatly differs from the understanding of individualism, which considers "self" as a static or finished idea.

From the perspective of the relationship between Heaven and humanity, the development of the "self", and the meaning of individual life over time, reproduction remains a meaningful behavior for the individual. Even in modern society, where the marginal benefits of reproduction seem to be smaller, it is still crucial for expanding the individual's understanding of themselves in both the temporal and spatial dimensions.

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Notes

- ¹ A study published in *The Lancet* in 2024 shows that over the past 70 years, the global total fertility rate has significantly declined from 4.84 in 1950 to 3.61 in 1980 and further down to 2.23 in 2021. This is equivalent to each woman having nearly five children in 1950, while by 2021, the number has decreased to 2.2. Among the regions studied, by 2018, the fertility rate of 103 countries and regions had dropped below the replacement level (the fertility level required for long-term population stability), accounting for almost half of the total study areas. See ([GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators 2024](#)).
- ² For relevant studies and works, see [Ann \(2018\)](#), [Sheila \(2019\)](#), [Adrienne \(2021\)](#).
- ³ For example, a study published in *Cell Metabolism* suggests that while pregnancy leads to a significant increase in the biological age of the mother, three months after the late stages of pregnancy and childbirth, the mother's biological age decreases substantially, with the reduction being two to three times greater than the increase caused by pregnancy. See [Pham et al. \(2024\)](#). Another study published in *Nature Communications* suggests that pregnancy reduces the risk of breast cancer in women. See [Feigman et al. \(2020\)](#).
- ⁴ In recent years, Confucian issues such as "zoetology" 生生论 and "family philosophy" 家哲学 have received significant attention. Scholars including Roger T. Ames, Zhang Xianglong 张祥龙, Ding Yun 丁耘, Yang Lihua 杨立华, and Sun Xiangchen 孙向晨 have made important contributions to these topics. See [Zhang \(2017\)](#), [Yang \(2018\)](#), [Ding \(2019\)](#), [Sun \(2019\)](#), [Ames \(2021\)](#).
- ⁵ Kang Youwei used the term 二帝三王 to the emperors Yao and Shun, and the founding kings of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, that is, the emperor Yu of Xia dynasty, emperor Tang of Shang dynasty and emperor Wen and Wu of Zhou dynasty.
- ⁶ For example, in the *Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century?* The authors mentioned about "relational self": "Yu argues that Aristotle's politick zoon bears a close resemblance throughout to the relational self of Confucius and Mencius". See ([Rosemont and Ames 2016](#), p. 110).

- 7 For example, in the Confucian Classic The Book of Rites (Li Ji), the chapter Liyun describes the public care and support in an ideal society: “When the great way is in practice then the world as a common property (rather than that as the property of the emperor), worthy and capable people are selected for government office, and people are reliable and seek harmony amongst each other. Therefore, in such a world, people do not only show affection for their parents or for their children but they make it so that the elderly have what they need to live out their lives, that the strong are put to proper use, that the young are provided for in their growth, and that the sick, orphaned, widowed, deformed, and destitute are all taken care of”. See (Zheng and Kong 2008, pp. 874–76).
- 8 According to the study of Gan Huaizhen, “By the Warring State period, the greatest change in intellectuals’ understanding of the objective world is their knowledge of physics. The universe was believed to be composed of what were called the ‘ten thousand things’ and the ‘ten thousand things’ were governed by their respective principle, namely physics. This branch of physics was focused on exploring the basic material elements of the universe, such as the Five Elements—metal, wood, water, fire and earth—and the origin of the dynamic properties of things. The answer they arrived at was ‘qi’ (vital force). Thus, qi was regarded as the basic material element and the source of dynamism in the universe”. See Gan (2024), Chapter IV.
- 9 It should be noted that the exclusion of females in Confucian ancestral rituals which is based on a patriarchal system presents a deep conflict with modern lifestyles and ideas. Therefore, how to address the conflict is a challenge for Confucianism in modern era.

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