Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making.” . . . There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.


This chapter will explore the role of tradition and community in the process in which a human being becomes “personally itself.” The argument will be (1) that tradition and community are constitutive as well as causal factors, so that they will contribute to elements of the soul or self that is formed, (2) that how they do this has a great deal to do with the excellence of the result, and (3) that Confucius gives an exceptionally good account of this in the stages corresponding to advanced education.

Our exploration will begin with the early stages and the development in childhood of the foundation of self. Then we will examine the development in teenage and early adult years, and how someone becomes a really good person. Finally, we need to pay some attention to general issues concerning the unity of the self and also creativity. To become personally oneself is an exceptionally important activity and, if done well, can be a creative achievement; we will need to examine the role of tradition and .
restricted a youth’s further choice of identity change.” Aristotle would not have been surprised by this observation. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is full of comments on the ethical importance of early upbringing and on how it should be managed. The *Analects* in contrast has relatively little that is explicitly on the subject. If we ask why this is so, when Confucius has so much to say about the advanced stages of ethical development, a variety of answers suggest themselves. One is that teachers and writers, including philosophers, often do not say what does not need to be said: what it can be assumed that virtually everyone in the audience already knows. It simply may be that early upbringing had become more problematic in Aristotle’s Greece than it was in Confucius’ China. Also, Confucius himself functioned primarily as an educator, all the while in search of other roles. His students were no longer small children when they arrived, and it would be natural for him to have much more to say about the stage of their ethical development in which he had a major role than about much earlier stages. Finally, it is natural to regard early childhood ethical development as the province of the family. Confucius has a great deal to say on the subject of family life and its importance. But this is compatible with regarding some matters as best left to the judgment of parents.

The broad outlines of what Confucius and his circle thought family relations should be are evident, as are the social ramifications of proper family structure. The *Analects* quotes Master Yu as saying, “Those who in private life behave well towards their parents and elder brothers, in public life seldom show a disposition to resist the authority of their superiors” (Book I, 2, p. 83). Proper family attitudes are the trunk of goodness.

Aristotle is far more specific on early childhood training techniques. “We ought to be brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought” (Book II, 3, p. 1744). Our more mature delight and pain are the result of childhood management (by parents and others) of pleasure and pain, which in a rather Pavlovian manner establishes predispositions to feel pleasure and pain at certain things or thoughts. This is central to early childhood patterning reinforced by pleasure and pain is crucial.
It would be tempting to regard the right set of habits as the core, and perhaps nearly the whole, of personal goodness. But Aristotle knew that this would be an exaggeration, for two reasons. One is that even someone who is a creature of habits can encounter major temptations, in which habit-violating actions promise great pleasure (or at least the thought of them is very pleasant). Even Pavlov’s dogs might well break their training under such circumstances. One element of protection in Aristotle’s view seems to be a habit of associating incontinent or antisocial behavior with pain, which can add a painful element to what would otherwise be pleasant thoughts of habit-violating behavior. Plainly this element can be supplied by persistent measures that make incontinent or antisocial behavior in early childhood come out to be, on balance, painful, thus creating a habit of painful thoughts to be associated with it. This is the most plausible explanation of what Aristotle has in mind by the “rudder of pain.”

A second reason why habits, including habits of connecting painful thoughts with certain kinds of transgressions, can never be entirely protective is that they will have power chiefly when someone is faced with familiar options in familiar kinds of circumstance. Their power, conversely, will be limited when the choice is among alternatives that may not be readily classifiable (so that someone may not identify what he or she is about to do as a transgression), or when the agent is disoriented by unusual circumstances in which the choice is presented. Familiar modern examples are choices made during wartime, or after social upheavals, or by people who have moved into occupations whose rules are not clear. Various psychological experiments, the most famous of which are the ones initiated by Stanley Milgram, have shown that a majority of people (most of whom must be presumed to have been moderately decent in ordinary life) will do appalling things in circumstances so unusual that ordinary standards might seem not to apply, especially if someone who seems reliable suggests to them that what they are about to do is really quite normal (see Milgram 1974; also Haney et al. 1973). The desire to ingratiate oneself, to be agreeable, appears to play a part in these cases. Perhaps this kind of thing is part of what Confucius had in mind in his observation (Book XVII, 13, p. 213) that “The’ honest villager’ spoils true virtue”?

Aristotle certainly would have been familiar with Plato’s thought experiment in the Myth of Er of Book X of the Republic (St. 619, p. 877).

Er is reported to have had a near-death experience in which he saw the
spirits of the dead, in the underworld, choosing new lives. One, who had completed a decent life in a well-regulated city, chose the life of a tyrant. Yielding to this glittering (and ruinous) temptation might seem inexplicable; but Plato remarks of the man, “His virtue was a matter of habit only, and he had no philosophy.” There is nothing to suggest that Aristotle differs from Plato on this issue. A good set of habits, including the habit of having painful thoughts on appropriate occasions, will constitute the foundation of personal goodness in Aristotle’s view and will not constitute goodness itself. The habits are a prelude to philosophy and are required in order to hear the philosophy in the right spirit.

Aristotle’s last word on the subject in the *Nicomachean Ethics* lays this out. “The soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed. . . . The character, then must somehow be there already with a kinship to excellence” (Book X, 9, p. 1864). The phrase “kinship to excellence” is meant, I think, to do justice to the phenomenon of the very good child, who has not fully become a very good person, but who is clearly on her or his way and already has qualities that resemble those of a very good person.

How do we create such very good children? It is here that Aristotle deviates most sharply from what Confucius almost certainly would have said. He insists that what are required are right laws. Sparta is referred to as a place where they take these things seriously, rather than allowing (as in most states) each man to live “as he pleases, Cyclops-fashion, ‘to his own wife and children dealing law’” (Book X, 9, pp. 1864–5).

It is well known that Confucius did not place emphasis on law as a contributory factor in social harmony or ethical development. He remarks (Book XII, 13, p. 167) that “I could try a civil suit as well as anyone. But better still to bring it about that there were no civil suits!” Criminal law similarly is marginalized. “Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you, and lose all self-respect” (Book II, 3, p. 88).

Crime and wrongdoing have to be seen as (by and large?) symptomatic of social suffering: people have enough to eat (Book XII, 7, p. 164; see also Book XII, 9; Book XIII, 9).