

Abridged Research Statement

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My research in social and political philosophy is centered on the question of what norms, social practices, and institutions can enable human flourishing. This question is complicated by the diversity of human aims, embodiments, talents, and vulnerabilities, as well as the complex dynamics of social life. Under such conditions, to what extent can norms, practices, and institutions realize values such as justice, freedom, dignity, and equality, and where do they fall short?

Vulnerability and interdependence are fundamental features of the human condition that give urgency to the project of building shared practices and political institutions. They also provide justification for these projects, as well as a vantage point from which to critique proposed and existing arrangements. While human flourishing is often considered in terms of individual projects, such projects often turn out to be social, as are the conditions under which we pursue them. My projects examine the possibilities for living well together and the obstacles that arise when our ideals confront the realities of practice.

A Relational Confucian Account of Human Dignity

My dissertation develops a relational account of dignity that challenges contemporary accounts that ground dignity in inherent traits of individuals, such as autonomy. These accounts risk excluding precisely the most vulnerable individuals whose dignity is most in need of protection. In response, I argue that dignity is constituted and conferred through exchanges of care, recognition, and respect, and that our obligations to sustain these practices can be justified by our shared human vulnerability and interdependence.

“Confucian Lived Dignity and Well-Being” (in press with the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*) points to the gap between normative conceptions of dignity and lived dignity as the experiences through which we come to understand ourselves and our lives as valuable. I illuminate the fundamentally social nature of dignity and its violation through empirical healthcare literature and Confucian narratives, ultimately arguing that sufficient experiences of dignity are vital for both subjective and psychological well-being. The Confucian account of lived dignity, comprised of basic, moral-cultivational, embodied, and relational dimensions, offers resources for rethinking normative dignity and healthcare interventions.

“A Relational Confucian Account of Human Dignity” develops the dissertation’s normative theory. I argue that our obligations to recognize and uphold dignity are grounded in the vulnerability and interrelatedness of human existence. This argument draws on the Confucian relational notion of self, according to which we are not independent individuals who later enter into relationships of mutual obligation; rather, our identities, agency, and opportunities for flourishing are constituted through intimate and public relationships. Our capacities and circumstances are contingent, leaving us vulnerable to being forsaken, and the continued

automatic recognition and care from others provide reassurance against this possibility. Recognizing our shared human condition gives us reasons to sustain the practices in which each person's worth is presumed rather than conditional on their features, abilities, or achievements.

Drawing on Confucian ritual theory, I locate dignity in the practices of mutual valorization through exchanges of care, attention, deference, and respect. Just as ornamentation of an object simultaneously acknowledges its value, makes its value public, and enhances its value, so too does the performance of ritual enact and confer human worth. These practices confer and constitute the dignity of persons, rather than simply acknowledging dignity as an inherent individual possession. This account accepts the fragility of normative dignity and our collective responsibility toward it: upholding dignity requires protecting individuals and preserving the social relations through which human worth is realized.

"Incomplete Bodies in Early Confucianism and the *Zhuangzi*" examines how embodied practices of recognition can produce stigma and, counterintuitively, render some individuals socially illegible when they do not conform to expectations. I contrast the Confucian social and institutional response to bodily differences with the Zhuangist critique of the conventional values that give rise to hierarchies of embodiment.

Future Lines of Research

My first book project tests and extends my account of human dignity. I examine how the relational account can ground rights and institutions and respond to the objection that it is more contingent, and therefore less secure, than inherent dignity. The monograph will also investigate whether human dignity can be justified without presupposing human exceptionalism.

Another book project builds on my master's thesis, *Confucian Liberalism*, in which I argue that Confucianism can provide its own justification for a freedom-oriented political order, grounded in an understanding of freedom as authentic self-realization, which must preserve substantial opportunities for personal choice, experimentation, and error. I will address the challenge of perfectionism, with related papers underway on Confucian rights and the relationship between moral, economic, and political agency in the *Mencius*.