

The Dialogue between Herman Bavinck and Mou Zongsan on Human Nature and Its Quality

Abstract

This article aims to make a comparison between Herman Bavinck, a leading neo-Calvinist theologian, and Mou Zongsan, arguably the most innovative New Confucian philosopher, on human nature and its quality, and to build a dialogue between them. Bavinck sets forth a theocentric explication on human nature, that is the *imago Dei*, which was created, is fallen and can only be restored in Jesus Christ who is the true *imago Dei*. In contrast, Mou anthropocentrically expounds human nature, which immanentizes the heavenly decree and is innately good. Despite their fundamental differences, a dialogue can still be articulated by differing Bavinck's God from Kant's God, the latter of which is critiqued by Mou.

Keywords

Herman Bavinck; Mou Zongsan; human nature; *imago Dei*; New Confucianism; moral anthropology; inner sageliness; outer kingliness

Introduction

With the rapid growth of Reformed theology in China since the second half of 20th century, neo-Calvinism now exerts a significant influence on many Chinese intellectuals.¹ As a leading neo-Calvinist theologian, Herman Bavinck (1854~1921) is well-known among Chinese Christian intellectuals and works such as *Our Reasonable Faith* and *The Philosophy of Revelation* have already been published in Chinese respectively in 1989 and 2014.

¹ On the influence of neo-Calvinism on Chinese intellectual Christians, see Alexander Chow, "Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today," *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 2 (2014): 158-75.

New Confucianism emerged in the early 20th century. This reflects a broader context, beginning in the mid-19th century, in which China was suffered from the political and military aggression of foreign powers. In order to revitalize China, some state officials argued for a slogan ‘Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as tool’ (*zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用). With an increasing attention to Western culture, a cultural trend against traditional Chinese culture – especially Confucianism – emerged. However, certain reformers developed what would later be known as ‘New Confucianism’ to re-fashion traditional Confucianism to defend it in contemporary Chinese culture. Amongst New Confucian scholars, Mou Zongsan (1909~1995) is the most innovative, because he articulates his philosophical system in such a way as to engage with both Chinese culture and Western philosophy. His thoughts continue to impact Chinese people’s understanding of Chinese culture.²

Considering the respective prominence of both Bavinck and Mou in China, the encounter between their thinking amongst Chinese intellectuals is inevitable. More importantly, a proper relationship between them will contribute to the inculturation of Reformed theology in China. Given these realities, it is surprising to find no major scholarly engagement between these two figures or their respective traditions.

This article aims to establish a dialogue between Bavinck and Mou by investigating their thoughts on human nature. Note that Mou himself is distinctly anti-Christian and has claimed that no true Chinese person should follow Christianity.³ My claim is that, given Mou’s absolutely antagonistic attitude to Christianity, although there exists a fundamental collision between Bavinck and Mou on their respective understandings of human nature, a dialogue

² Further information on Mou’s biography and works, see N. Serina Chan, *The Thought of Mou Zongsan* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 7-23.

³ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo zhexue de tezhi* [The Uniqueness of Chinese Philosophy], ed. Luo Yijun (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2007), 135 (hereafter ZZDT). All translation from Chinese are by the author.

between them is still feasible. In the first two sections, I will respectively expound Mou's and Bavinck's theories of human nature. In the third section, I will provide a basis for articulating a dialogue between them.

Mou Zongsan on Human Nature and Its Quality

Echoing the commonly-held claim that the foundation of Chinese culture is found in moral living, Mou's philosophy revolves around human morality.⁴ He calls this philosophy moral philosophy, differing from Kant's moral theology, which requires the concept of God.⁵ One focus of Mou's moral philosophy is metaphysics, which relates to every being.⁶ That means Mou's 'morality' comprises a metaphysical sense and directly relates to human existence.

This section aims to demonstrate that Mou's metaphysically moral anthropology defends human innate goodness and moral ability, whereby human beings can achieve the perfect good. In what follows, Mou's notions of human nature (*xing* 性), good and evil will be elucidated based on his metaphysical morality.

I Human Nature: Origin and Essence

Mou maintains that human nature is the consequence of the immanentization of heavenly decree (*tianming* 天命) into humans.⁷ The heavenly decree conveys a sense of transcendence: "... imperceptibly, there is an imperishable and unchangeable standard, under which we discern that our behaviors should have no deviation or transgression."⁸ Thus, human nature is the consequence of the immanentization of a transcendent standard.

Mou does not expound on the 'standard'; nonetheless, he proposes that Confucius' idea of benevolence (*ren* 仁) will assist our understanding of human nature and the heavenly decree.

⁴ ZZDT, 10-1.

⁵ Mou Zongsan, *Xinti yu xingtì* [Human Mind and Human Nature], 3 vols (Changchun: Jilin Publishing Group, 2013), 1:10-2, 123-50 (hereafter *XT*); see Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 641.

⁶ *XT*, 1:11.

⁷ ZZDT, 20

⁸ ZZDT, 16.

In Mou's view, one of Confucius' crucial theories is 'practicing benevolence to know heaven' (*jianren zhi tian* 践仁知天).⁹ As to the term 'heaven,' Mou adopts Confucius' concept of the metaphysical and transcendental heaven.¹⁰ Note that Confucius does not straightforwardly identify benevolence with this heaven and also does not expound the relationship between benevolence and human nature. Nonetheless, based on Confucius' saying, Mou contends that one of the functions of benevolence is to constitute a remote communion between the transcendent human nature and heaven.¹¹ In this respect, benevolence is metaphysical. By practicing benevolence, individual life will be in communion with metaphysical life, that is, a cosmic life. Therefore, he claims that benevolence represents real life (moral life) or rational life, the real substance of human beings and real self.¹² Ultimately, benevolence, heaven and human nature are one.

While Mou's engagement with Confucius underscores the origin of human nature, he further engages Mencius with regard to the essence of human nature. The central idea of Mencius' theory is the inner benevolence and righteousness of human heart-mind (*renyi neizai yu xin* 仁义内在于心), whereby human nature can be expounded.¹³

Mou starts with the dispute between Mencius and Gaozi, regarding the saying – "what is inborn is nature." To Gaozi, 'nature' refers to the biological and natural qualities of creatures. Mencius' polemic against Gaozi is that, if 'nature' refers to natural qualities, human nature cannot be distinguished from animal nature. Mencius differentiates double implications of 'nature': actual nature and the nature of moral creative reality. Non-human creatures only possess the former, the nature of material structure, whereas the latter is a nature of vertical

⁹ *XT*, 1:21.

¹⁰ Although Mou recognizes the transcendence of heaven, he refuses to characterise it as personal, like the 'God' of Christianity; *XT*, 1:22; also see Mou Zongsan, *Yuan shan lun* [Theory of the Perfect Good] (Changchun: Jilin Publishing Group, 2010), 98 (hereafter *YSL*).

¹¹ *ZZDT*, 28.

¹² *ZZDT*, 30; *XT*, 2:187.

¹³ *ZZDT*, 50. In Chinese philosophy, *xin* (心) generally indicates the principle of both thinking and feeling. It is here translated 'heart-mind.'

creation and is possessed by humans alone. Mencius accounts for human nature from the perspective of the latter.¹⁴

What is the meaning of creative reality or vertical creation? Mou asserts that the noumenon of the heavenly decree is unceasingly moving, which possesses creativity, whereby the heavenly decree is creativity itself or creative reality.¹⁵ Thus, the vertical creation is the action of the heavenly decree. Notably, ‘creativity’ here differs from that in Christian theological understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*. To Mou, ‘creativity’ is a matter of morality. Moreover, human beings are capable of absorbing the noumenon of the unceasingly moving heavenly decree as their nature.¹⁶ That means, although the heavenly decree is transcendent, it can be immanentized into human nature. Because of this, moral metaphysics establishes an inseparable relationship between ontology and morality so that humans possess direct knowledge of morality and moral value.¹⁷ Thus, the essence of human nature is the moral creative reality.

What is the implication of moral creative reality? Mou again appeals to Mencius. Mencius innovatively puts forward the view that human heart-mind and human nature are one.¹⁸ That means the heavenly decree (the moral creativity) indwells human heart-mind in the same way as in human nature. Hence, the human heart-mind is the moral creative reality. Moreover, Mencius agrees with Confucius that benevolence stands for real human life.¹⁹ Thus, the human heart-mind is a benevolent heart-mind (*renxin* 仁心), which can also be called a moral original heart-mind (*daode zhi benxin* 道德之本心).²⁰ Therefore, benevolence, the heart-mind and

¹⁴ *XT*, 2:115-42; *YSL*, 5-10. Gaozi was a Mencius’ contemporary, a well-known Confucian thinker. He maintained that human nature is indifferent to good or evil.

¹⁵ *ZZDT*, 21; *XT*, 2:126-7, 134.

¹⁶ *XT*, 2:133-4; *ZZDT*, 53.

¹⁷ Nicholas Bunnin, ‘God’s Knowledge and Ours: Kant and Mou Zongsan on Intellectual Intuition,’ *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40 (2013): 52.

¹⁸ Mencius is the first person to put forward the concept of ‘heart-mind,’ see *ZZDT*, 61.

¹⁹ *XT*, 2:181.

²⁰ *XT*, 1:25.

human nature are correlated and identified with one another. Benevolence is also the metaphysical creative reality. Consequently, Mou maintains that, insofar as the inward moral creative reality is the fountain of moral value, Mencius' theory unambiguously expounds the outward generation of benevolence and righteousness from human heart-mind.²¹

In summary, Mou elaborates human nature respectively from transcendent and immanent aspects. On the one hand, the origin of human nature is found in the descending transcendent heavenly decree, reflecting the metaphysical aspect of human nature. On the other hand, the essence of human nature is demonstrated according to the human heart-mind, which is the immanent moral creative reality that outwardly generates benevolence and righteousness. Mou combines these two aspects and argues that human nature is the transcendent creative property, which triggers human moral creation and enables human beings to carry out moral praxis.²²

II Human Nature: Good or Evil, That Is not a Question

Mou steadfastly upholds the traditional Confucian doctrine of the goodness of human nature, as first propagated by Mencius. For Mou, while human nature is definitely good, the challenge is in demonstrating this position and wrestling with the problem of evil.

Mou resorts to Mencius' theory of inner benevolence and righteousness, which indicates that human nature automatically generates and develops benevolence and righteousness.²³ Mou points out that 'inner' indicates that benevolence and righteousness inhere in the transcendent moral original heart-mind, which is universal, *a priori* and pure.²⁴ Mou attempts to demonstrate the innate goodness of human nature from the perspective of moral ontology. He insists that human nature or human heart-mind is a transcendent noumenal reality, which is the absolute supreme good and unconditionally categorical, and which is the standard of moral judgement,

²¹ *YSL*, 13, 49.

²² See *YSL*, 238.

²³ *YSL*, 13.

²⁴ *XT*, 1:106, 109.

but is not judged by anything else.²⁵ Thereby, Mou's doctrine of the goodness of human nature is supported. Essentially, he highlights the moral subjectivity of human beings, defending the absoluteness of human nature and moral autonomy of human beings. As will be demonstrated, Mou's theory contradicts Bavinck's theocentric elaboration on human nature.

It is noteworthy that Mou's concept of supreme good is different from that of Christianity, in which 'supreme good' is an ontological description of God. Theologically, this phrase is used in an ultimate sense. God is the ultimate and unique moral criterion to judge good and evil. In Mou's view, the supreme good is not the opposite of evil; alternatively, it is used for praising.²⁶ The 'supreme good' is only used to speak of the absolute good of human nature *per se* rather than phenomenal good and evil in terms of a relative sense.²⁷ One cannot adopt 'good' or 'evil' to modify human nature; rather, they can be employed to describe the real manifestation of human nature.²⁸ In speaking of human nature, 'good' or 'goodness' to Mou is not real and ontological. Thereby, Mou shifts the locus of the issue of human nature from the noumenal to the phenomenal. This also becomes the basis of his approach to settling the problem of evil at the phenomenal level.

Mou's treatment of evil has two aspects: defining 'evil' (*zui'e* 罪惡) and referencing Kant's philosophy to complement Confucianism. First, Mou's definition is that evil is neither an objective being nor a positive being, but the consequence of the reflection of moral good that is developed out of moral consciousness (*daode yishi* 道德意识).²⁹ For Mou, moral consciousness is identified with the transcendent human heart-mind, which is the transcendentally and absolutely supreme good.³⁰ In this sense, evil is abstract. It is an uncertain

²⁵ *XT*, 1:38; 2:378-9; also see Chan, *The Thought of Mou Zongsan*, 238-40.

²⁶ *XT*, 2:378.

²⁷ *XT*, 2:378.

²⁸ *XT*, 2:382; see Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 1998), 164.

²⁹ *ZZDT*, 58-9. Moral consciousness refers to moral knowing or conscience (*liangzhi* 良知), which indicates human inherent capacity to know the good. In most cases, Mou's 'evil' comprises the notions of sin and evil.

³⁰ *XT*, 2:165; Chan, *Thought of Mou Zongsan*, 51, 151.

phenomenon that is without real existence, but it is determined by the human heart-mind. The manifestation of evil depends entirely on moral good that is developed out from the human heart-mind. Actually, Mou reinforces the moral subjectivity and autonomy of human beings, and strengthens human significance in judging and addressing evil.

Mou's treatment of evil inevitably focuses on the capacity of the human being. This can be expressed through two aspects: the attainment of 'perfect good' (*yuanshan* 圆善), and 'inner sageliness and outer kingliness' (*neisheng waiwang* 内圣外王).

Although Mou does not explicitly assert that one approach to dealing with the issue of evil is the attainment of perfect good, the notion of the 'perfect good' is fundamental in Mou's philosophical system. Since Mou regards evil as the consequence of being reflected by moral good when the perfect good is attained, evil is thoroughly eliminated.

Mou sets out perfect good in the comparison with Kant's *summum bonum*.³¹ Kant writes that "*summum bonum* expresses the whole, the perfect good, in which, however, virtue as the condition is always the supreme good ...; whereas happiness ... always presupposes morally right behaviour as its condition."³²

To Kant, "[i]n the *summum bonum* ... virtue and happiness are thought as necessarily combined."³³ This combination indicates an 'exact proportion.'³⁴ This means the *summum bonum* where virtue (the supreme good) and happiness, which presupposes morally right behaviour, proportionally correspond with each other can be attained to deal with the problem of evil. In other words, while human behaviour proportionally corresponds with the supreme good, the issue of evil will be resolved.

So far Mou agrees with Kant. However, Kant insists on two postulates of the *summum*

³¹ See YSL, p.128-185. Mou's "perfect good" is equal to Kant's *summum bonum*.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. Thomas Abbott (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898), 206–207.

³³ Kant, *Practical Reason*, 209.

³⁴ Kant, *Practical Reason*, 206.

bonum: the immortality of soul and God's existence.³⁵ Because of an infinite progress of attaining the *summum bonum*, Kant contends that the soul ought to be immortal so that humans can endlessly exist. Meanwhile, since virtue and happiness in the *summum bonum* should proportionally correspond with each other, Kant argues that this correspondence needs to be caused by a supreme cause, that is, God. In other words, God becomes standard of human morality.

Mou firmly refutes Kant's insistence on the existence of God, though he agrees with Kant on an infinite progress to the *summum bonum*.³⁶ He asserts that Kant's idea of 'God' is an illusion.³⁷ It is unnecessary to postulate a "God" as the foundation of the perfect good. Alternatively, Mou again stresses the significance of human moral subjectivity.

Mou's innovation is that he raises the notion of 'infinite wisdom heart-mind' (*wuxian zhixin* 无限智心), which is developed from benevolence and identical with the benevolent heart-mind.³⁸ On the ground of the moral creativity of the human heart-mind, Mou avers that the infinite wisdom heart-mind establishes moral certainty and that it also creates all things.³⁹ Again, Mou correlates morality with ontology, that is, he makes human morality as the basis of ontic existence. Then, the infinite wisdom heart-mind is capable of attaining to the perfect good. By rejecting Kant's insistence on God's existence, Mou actually makes human beings God.

How can the perfect good be realized? In this respect, Mou redefines the Buddhist theory of classifying teachings (*panjiao* 判教): 'teaching' refers to sages' sayings; generally, it is able to enlighten human reason that can be applied to the praxis of morality and liberation, or to

³⁵ Kant, *Practical Reason*, 218-29.

³⁶ See ZZDT, 93.

³⁷ YSL, 189-98.

³⁸ YSL, 198, 202-3.

³⁹ YSL, 203.

purify and sanctify life in order to achieve the highest ideal goal.⁴⁰ Hence, humans call for the classification of teachings whose ultimate is supreme or perfect teaching (*yuanjiao* 圆教).

When the perfect teaching is proved, the perfect good can be understood and achieved.

While classifying the teachings of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, Mou upholds the theory of paradoxical identity (*guijue de ji* 诡谲的即) of the Tiantai Buddhist tradition.⁴¹

To a large extent, the theory of paradoxical identity is similar to Hegel's dialectics, basically regarding the "mutual entailment" of "opposing forces."⁴² Mou applies the theory of paradoxical identity to the relationship between virtue and happiness. Specifically, the proportional correspondence between virtue and happiness denotes a relationship of paradoxical identity (or dialectical relationship): virtue and happiness depend on each other, and they mutually transform and generate. Consequently, the teaching that conforms to the relationship of the paradoxical identity between virtue and happiness is the perfect teaching.

However, Mou is aware that Buddhism does not have the teachings of moral creation, with the result that they cannot radically explicate mutual generation and transformation between virtue and happiness.⁴³ Insofar as in Confucianism the human heart-mind is morally creative reality, the perfect teaching can be attained in Confucianism by employing the Buddhist theory of paradoxical identity. Thus, Confucianism can enable human beings to attain the perfect good, and finally resolve the issue of evil.

Mou's second approach to wrestling with evil is 'inner sageliness and outer kingliness.' 'Inner sageliness' firstly implies that "a man can thoroughly eliminate irrationality and anti-rationality, and consciously endeavor to actualize the noumenon of human nature and heart-

⁴⁰ YSL, 206.

⁴¹ Tiantai tradition is one of the most important Buddhist traditions in China.

⁴² On Hegel's influence on Mou's philosophy, see Chan, *Thought of Mou Zongsan*, 95-118. Mou does not refute others to entitle the relationship of paradoxical identity with dialectic relationship, see Yang Zebo, "Guijue de ji yu kong yan le chu," *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University (Social Science Edition)* 50 no.2 (2010): 142.

⁴³ YSL, 234.

mind in life.”⁴⁴ This means the inner sageliness leads to a self-cultivation and the complete manifestation of human nature, that is, the benevolent heart-mind. Second, it signifies that “the moral effort (*gongfu* 工夫) of the inner sageliness is to become a sage.”⁴⁵ Mou insists on the human capacity for achieving moral good and disengaging from evil. Third, it indicates that “human nature includes all things, and the process of the embodiment of heart-mind and virtue is infinite.”⁴⁶ The universal human nature entails the certainty of morality; so it can be embodied in real life, whereas the process is infinite. In short, by the theory of inner sageliness, Mou stresses human moral capacity, an underlying force that is capable of self-cultivation and overcoming evil.

Along with inner sageliness, Mou also accentuates outer kingliness as well. He maintains that “the inner sageliness is inevitably embedded with the demand for [the] outer kingliness.”⁴⁷ The kingliness is conditioned by the virtue of the inner sageliness, and will be actualized by self-cultivation. Notwithstanding following the Confucian tradition and rendering ‘kingliness’ as political activities, Mou raises a new kingliness.⁴⁸ He argues that the shortcoming of Chinese culture is the lack of democracy and science—two key themes in the Chinese political discourse in the early-20th century. By reviving Confucianism and absorbing Western democracy and science, a new kingliness can be developed out of the inner sageliness.⁴⁹ The realization of the new kingliness is the goal of moral praxis and self-cultivation, which is forced by the inner sageliness. Therefore, evil will be eliminated as soon as democracy and science can be established in Chinese culture.

Having seen democracy and science as the solution to evil, Mou confines the issue of evil to political and social phenomena. Mou’s argument is deeply influenced by his contemporary

⁴⁴ ZZDT, 69.

⁴⁵ ZZDT, 71.

⁴⁶ ZZDT, 73.

⁴⁷ YSL, 122. Old outer kingliness refers to the actualization of moral duties in social and political fields.

⁴⁸ ZZDT, 10-1; YSL, 122, 125.

⁴⁹ ZZDT, 75-83.

political and social contexts as well as by the ethos of New Confucianism. Therefore, belonging to the second generation of the New Confucian Movement, Mou's theory of inner sageliness and outer kingliness particularly stresses the significance of Confucianism to Chinese politics. He believes that the Chinese political problem (evil) will be completely resolved as long as inner sageliness and outer kinship can be realized.

III Summary

The keynote of Mou's argument is the innate goodness of human nature. Human nature and the human heart-mind are one, and they are morally good. Both of them are of benevolence. Moreover, Mou's discussion on human nature consists of dual implications: the objective side concerns the descending of the heavenly decree into human nature; the subjective side relates to fulfilling human nature by moral praxis. By the former, Mou confers metaphysical significance on human nature, which can absorb the unceasingly moving heavenly decree. That means human nature (infinite wisdom heart-mind) is transcendent and creative, and becomes the cause of the existence of all things. By the latter, Mou commends human moral capacity in attaining to the perfect good. As long as human nature can be completely embodied (the actualization of inner sageliness), the perfect good can be attained, eliminating evil (the realization of outer kingliness).

In a word, based on human nature's innate goodness and in order to defend human moral autonomy and subjectivity, Mou is confident that human moral capacity and praxis can overcome evil and finally realize the perfect good in reality.

Herman Bavinck on Human Nature and Its Quality

The hallmark of Bavinck's theology is the centrality of the triune God. The same is true of his theological anthropology. This section will argue that central to Bavinck's exposition of human nature is God rather than humankind. This theocentric stance can be seen through the affinity between human nature and creation as well as salvation in Christ. Admittedly, Bavinck's view opposes Mou's recurring emphasis on human moral subjectivity. This section will proceed in elaborating the origin, the essence and the quality (good or evil) of human nature according to Bavinck's theological anthropology.

I Human Nature: Origin and Essence

A crucial pillar of Bavinck's anthropology is the doctrine of creation. Upholding the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, Bavinck insists that human beings were created by God out of nothing.⁵⁰ The doctrine resist any attempt to weaken God's role as the sole fountain of all creation. Thereby, an unequivocally ontological distinction and correlation between God and humans is determined. Humans are ontologically different from God; moreover, the being and existence of humans are totally dependent on God. The distinction and unbreakable correlation between God and human beings reveal the organic motif of Bavinck's theology. This motif accents the unity and diversity, and the precedence of the unity to diversity; thereby, the triune God, who is unity-in-diversity, is the ultimate cause of creatures that are unity-and-diversity.⁵¹

In Bavinck's view, the creation of human beings in the *imago Dei* is the culmination of God's creation, whereby "the spiritual and material worlds are joined together" in human beings.⁵² By the *imago Dei*, God's vestiges in the world "are recapitulated in man."⁵³ Thus,

⁵⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2008), 2:416 (hereafter *RD*).

⁵¹ James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 68-9.

⁵² *RD*, 2:511.

⁵³ *RD*, 2:561.

Bavinck contends that “the essence of human nature” is the *imago Dei*.⁵⁴ In this sense, Bavinck’s elaboration on the *imago Dei* is his theological explication on human nature.

Before further elucidation of the *imago Dei*, it is necessary to expound Bavinck’s notions of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in Genesis 1:26. Like John Calvin, Bavinck argues that there is no material distinction between these two terms.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, he in a certain degree differentiates ‘image’ from ‘likeness’. The sense of ‘likeness’ is broader than that of ‘image’. ‘Image’ in the stricter sense indicates that “God is the archetype, man the ectype”.⁵⁶ Hence, he employs ‘*imago Dei*’ to indicate that humankind is God’s image.⁵⁷

Theologians tend to describe humankind as God’s image-bearer. However, Bavinck prefers “the idea that a human being does not *bear* or *have* the image of God but that he or she *is* the image of God.”⁵⁸ This means the whole person of human being is the *imago Dei*. Not only does the soul belong to the *imago Dei*, but also the human body.⁵⁹ Bavinck’s argument is grounded on the doctrine of creation, which stresses “the inherent goodness of created matter, especially the human body.”⁶⁰ This is different from Calvin’s theory, which describes the human soul as the primary seat of the *imago Dei*, although “there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.”⁶¹ Calvin seems to render human body as the instrument through which the glory of the *imago Dei* emits. Thus, soul appears to be superior to human body. Such point of view may become the seed of some types of asceticism and Platonic dualism. In contrast, Bavinck’s assertion on the whole person as the *imago Dei* safeguards the value of both soul and body.

⁵⁴ *RD*, 2:530.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 2:532; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), I.xv.3.

⁵⁶ *RD*, 2:532.

⁵⁷ *RD*, 2:533.

⁵⁸ *RD*, 2:554; the italics are original.

⁵⁹ *RD*, 2:559.

⁶⁰ Dane C. Ortlund, “‘Created Over a Second Time’ or ‘Grace Restoring Nature’? Edwards and Bavinck on the Heart of Christian Salvation,” *The Bavinck Review* 3 (2012):18.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.3.

Bavinck articulates an ontological construal of the *image Dei*. He refutes both naturalistic and supernaturalistic explanations of the *imago Dei*. In naturalism, the *imago Dei* is materially identified with a part of human being; and in supernaturalism, the *imago Dei* is identified with a supernatural grace.⁶² Bavinck maintains that “[t]he image of God is not an external and mechanical appendage to us but integral to our very being: it is our health.”⁶³ In other words, the *imago Dei* is not a material substance; instead, it is an ontic quality of human being.

What is the implication of the *imago Dei*? For Bavinck, a considerably significant content of the *imago Dei* is “the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.”⁶⁴ This explanation echoes Calvin’s argument built upon ground of Genesis 1:26, Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. According to Calvin, the *imago Dei* originally consists in knowledge, righteousness and holiness that humankind was endowed with at creation.⁶⁵ To Bavinck, the embedded knowledge, righteousness and holiness signify humanity’s original state of integrity, that is, the physical and ethical maturity.⁶⁶ It is notable that the original maturity is not the equivalent of glorified state at the eschaton. Human beings still need to depend on God’s special revelation and providence in order to achieve further growth until the eschaton.

In addition, Bavinck claims that human faculties belong to the *imago Dei* as well. The human faculties refer to both the physical and the psychic.⁶⁷ Particularly by the “psychic capacities and activities of human beings,” the *imago Dei* is manifested.⁶⁸ As to the physical, insofar as the human body belongs to the *imago Dei*, so its activities reflect the *imago Dei*. Bavinck here reinforces his principle that the whole person is the *imago Dei*.

In short, primarily grounded on the doctrine of creation, Bavinck firmly holds that the

⁶² RD, 2:534-42.

⁶³ RD, 3:174.

⁶⁴ RD, 2:557; also see 2:531-2.

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, Gen. 1:26; Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.4.

⁶⁶ RD, 2:557-8.

⁶⁷ RD, 2:556.

⁶⁸ RD, 2:557.

origin of human nature is God, through whose creation humankind is the *imago Dei*. This means the essence of human nature is the *imago Dei*. Bavinck underscores the importance of the ethical and moral aspects of the *imago Dei*: knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Moreover, Bavinck holistically analyzes the meanings of the *imago Dei*. Nothing in humanity is excluded from the *imago Dei*. Both body and soul, and both the physical and the psychic aspects of human being belongs to the *imago Dei*.

II Human Nature: Not Good or Evil, but Fallen and Restored

When it comes to the quality of human nature, two doctrines have to be mentioned: the fall of human beings and salvation in Christ. The former concerns a thorny question: whether the human nature is good or evil. In a rigid sense, it is to consider the human situation after the fall. The latter is concerned with the solution to evil and sin. Strictly speaking, Bavinck's challenge is not to expound whether human nature is good or evil; rather, he needs to elaborate whether the doctrine of the fall contradicts the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and how human nature can be restored in Christ and regain the *imago Dei*.

First of all, Bavinck needs to deal with how ethically mature humans possibly fell before God. This dilemma is essentially related to the question of the origin of sin. Bavinck firstly affirms the fall, which is potentially contradictory to Mou's insistence on humanity's innate goodness. Meanwhile, Bavinck firmly refutes the attempt to make God "the author of sin."⁶⁹ His approach in dealing with this dilemma is to distinguish the possibility of sin from the reality of sin, which follows Augustine's view of *posse non peccare* from *non posse peccare*. According to Augustine, human beings was originally created with "an ability not to sin" and "the possibility of sinning," which is closely related to human will.⁷⁰ Standing in the tradition of Augustinian theology, Bavinck claims that God willed the possibility of sin when he created

⁶⁹ RD, 3:59.

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), XXII.30.

human beings in his image.⁷¹ Immediately, he adds that the origin of sin is in the human will, rather than God.⁷² In the beginning of their creation, humans “could sin and fall”.⁷³ Hence, the *imago Dei* in the original state comprises the possibility of sin. As Hoekema observes, the original state of human beings is not consummate and completely perfect.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, possibility is different from reality; hence, it is inappropriate to ascribe the origin of sin to God.

Bavinck explains:

They did not yet possess the highest, inadmissible freedom, that is, the freedom of no longer being able to want to sin. The image of God in humanity was therefore still limited; it had not developed in all its fullness; it still had its limit in the possibility of sinning.⁷⁵

In Bavinck’s view, the original *imago Dei* needs to develop and achieve its consummate state, wherein the reality of sin no longer takes place. Therefore, the doctrine of the fall does not contradict the *imago Dei*.

Notably, confirming the compatibility between the fall and the *imago Dei* notwithstanding, Bavinck frankly recognizes how the possibility of sin in the *imago Dei* became sin in reality is forever a mystery.⁷⁶ The origin of sin in Bavinck’s view is inexplicable and incomprehensible. Nonetheless, he discerns the essence of sin, that is, “an active privation.”⁷⁷ First, echoing Augustine, sin is the “privation of the good.”⁷⁸ Second, this privation possesses “a positive quality” that is actively against the law of God.⁷⁹ Consequently, the possibility of sin becoming sin in reality signifies an active impact of sin on the *imago Dei*.

⁷¹ RD, 3:66.

⁷² RD, 3:66.

⁷³ RD, 3:66.

⁷⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 83.

⁷⁵ RD, 3:67.

⁷⁶ RD, 3:69, 145.

⁷⁷ RD, 3:138.

⁷⁸ RD, 3:136, 140; Augustine, *City of God*, XI.9.

⁷⁹ RD, 3:138, 140-1.

It is necessary to consider another question here: now that the original *imago Dei* is not in a consummate state, has it been lost after the fall? In this respect, Bavinck diametrically disagrees with Martin Luther. In Luther's view, that the *imago Dei* consists in the being of humans denotes human knowledge of God's goodness and human godly life. After the fall, humans have entirely lost the *imago Dei*.⁸⁰ Humankind no longer lives for God's favor. By contrast, Bavinck defends Calvin's assertion that human beings still retain the *imago Dei* after the fall but it has been deformed by sin.⁸¹

In order to deal effectively with the question, Bavinck proposes that the *imago Dei* should be understood respectively in broader and narrower senses. Despite his lack of further clarification of both senses, it can be inferred that the broader sense of the *imago Dei* indicates what makes human beings, whereas the narrower sense particularly refers to moral quality; they are organically related to each other.⁸² In Bavinck's view, although the *imago Dei* in the narrower sense was lost, the *imago Dei* in the broader sense still remains in human beings, but it has been affected by the loss. Thereby, he defends "humanity's humanness" by the broader sense and also upholds "the Reformed notion of total depravity."⁸³

Grounded on the doctrine of the fall, Bavinck insists on the doctrine of original sin, that is, that "Adam's sin ... [is] viewed as an act committed by him and all his followers."⁸⁴ Thus, sinfulness inheres in every human being, the result of which is human total corruption and depravity. Despite retaining the *imago Dei* in the broader sense after the fall, human faculties cannot function properly according to God's will.⁸⁵ Original sin becomes "the origin and

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 1*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan et al (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 62-3.

⁸¹ *RD*, 2:550-2, 554; Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.4.

⁸² *RD*, 2:549-54, 3:101.

⁸³ Cory Willson, "Simul Humanitas et Peccator: The Talmud's Contribution to a Dutch Reformed Notion of the *Imago Dei*," in *Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 265.

⁸⁴ *RD*, 3:83-5, 94.

⁸⁵ Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 163.

source of all other sins.”⁸⁶ Because of Adam’s disobedience to God, all his descendants live in the state of disobedience, sinning against God. Therefore, original sin is not a constituent or component of human being; rather, it refers to a sinful quality which alienates humans from God.

How could all humans sin in Adam? Bavinck maintains that Adam’s transgression should be understood in the federal sense rather than the realistic.⁸⁷ That means the relationship between Adam and his descendants is not merely biological, more importantly, but federal. Adam and all humans belong to the same “federal unity,” wherein Adam is the representative of humankind.⁸⁸ Thus, whatever Adam did before the fall would be imputed to his descendants.

The federal view also can be applied to the case of the solution to sin, that is, the case of the relationship between Christ and his followers. Now that human sin is relevant to the loss of the *imago Dei* in the narrower sense and the ruin of the *imago Dei* in the broader sense, the solution to sin must be related to the *imago Dei*. Therefore, Bavinck claims that in Christ humans can regain the *imago Dei* which was lost in Adam.⁸⁹

Bavinck first of all asserts that there is a universal consensus on “the necessity of a mediator between humanity and the divine.”⁹⁰ The mediator will bring redemption, by which humans will triumph over evil and sin and be reconciled with God. Then, Bavinck maintains that Christ is this very mediator. Because of Christ’s incarnation and personal union (the hypostatic union between the divine and the human), he is the federal head of his followers.⁹¹ Christ’s obedience to God and whatever he did can be imputed to those who believe in him. It can be inferred that the reason that Christ is in federal relationship to his followers is intimately related to his human nature. Indeed, as Mattson comments, Christ’s “assumption of true

⁸⁶ *RD*, 3:101.

⁸⁷ *RD*, 3:103.

⁸⁸ *RD*, 3:102-4.

⁸⁹ *RD*, 2:550.

⁹⁰ *RD*, 3:233, 238, 327.

⁹¹ *RD*, 3:317, 449.

humanity ... opens the way for a restoration of [human] *imago Dei*.”⁹² To state this more specifically and essentially, human beings can regain the *imago Dei* insofar as Christ is the true *imago Dei*. As Bavinck writes,

[i]n the divine being [Christ] occupies the place between the Father and the Spirit, is by nature the Son and image of God, was mediator already in the first creation, and as Son could restore us to our position as children of God.⁹³

In Bavinck’s view, Christ’s identity as the mediator or federal head should be explained in an intratrinitarian respect. The human *imago Dei* is the consequence of extratrinitarian mission, the source of which is intratrinitarian life. Likewise, the precondition to the restoration of the extratrinitarian human *imago Dei* is relevant to Christ’s *imago Dei* of the intratrinitarian life. Hence, the *imago Dei* of those who believe in Christ can be restored to the original state according to the archetypical *imago Dei*, that is, Christ himself.

By the restoration in Christ, humans regain the *imago Dei* and moral qualities, especially the original knowledge, righteousness and holiness. This restoration can be expressed as reconciliation with God in Christ.⁹⁴ In Bavinck’s writings, God is unambiguously equivalent to the highest good.⁹⁵ Therefore, by restoring the *imago Dei*, human beings are capable of reaching the highest good. Prior to writing *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck has claimed that the highest good is the Kingdom of God.⁹⁶ At first glance, Bavinck’s two assertions seem to contradict each other insofar as God cannot be identified with the Kingdom of God. In fact, Bavinck articulates the relationship between God and his Kingdom in the organic sense: “[t]he head of the Kingdom of God is Christ.”⁹⁷ Bavinck articulates a pattern of extratrinitarian-to-

⁹² Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 201.

⁹³ *RD*, 3:276; also see 3:362, 367.

⁹⁴ *RD*, 3:447.

⁹⁵ *RD*, 1:241, 286; 2:557; 3:491

⁹⁶ Herman Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good,” trans. Nelson Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011):135.

⁹⁷ Bavinck, “Kingdom,” 145.

intratrinitarian to explicate this relationship. As the federal head of his followers (in an extratrinitarian sense) and the image of God (in an intratrinitarian sense), Christ himself is God and in communion with the members of the Kingdom of God. Inasmuch as the head of the Kingdom is God who is the highest good, the Kingdom of God is also the highest good. In other words, those who are in the federal relationship with Christ belong to the Kingdom of God, the head of which is the highest good – God.

A crucial aspect here is that Bavinck utilizes the notion of the Kingdom of God to make a bridge between the highest good and community. Then, moral qualities are not limited to individuals; instead, they are of the community of individuals. The Kingdom of God is the complete realization of the community, whereas, in this world, the community refers to the church, which is “the indispensable foundation of the Kingdom of God.”⁹⁸ In order to connect every individual in the community to the highest good (God), the church seeks to “consecrate people to God” in every aspect of life, such as natural life, moral life and political life.⁹⁹ In short, by regaining the *imago Dei* in Christ, God who is the highest good penetrates into the life of the community and each of its members.

III Summary

Bavinck’s exploration into the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is essentially his theological elaboration on human nature. He combines the doctrine of the *imago Dei* with God’s creation and salvation.¹⁰⁰ The former lays the foundation of the whole investigation, explicating the origin of the *imago Dei* and its essential quality. The latter delineates the status of human nature after the fall and explains how it can be regained. His emphasis is not whether human nature is good or evil. Instead, it is what the fallen human nature is and how it can be restored in Christ.

As against Mou’s human subjectivity and moral autonomy, Bavinck’s focal point in his

⁹⁸ Bavinck, “Kingdom,” 158, 164.

⁹⁹ Bavinck, “Kingdom,” 159.

¹⁰⁰ Bavinck’s anthropology comprises human origin, nature and destiny. Given the space of the article, the author focuses merely on the origin and the nature. On Bavinck’s view of human destiny, see RD 2:563-88.

elaboration on human nature and the *imago Dei* is not human beings but rather God. The starting point of Bavinck's elaboration is God's creation; meanwhile, the end point is God's salvation, that is, the restoration of the *imago Dei* from Christ who is the true *imago Dei*. Admittedly, the purpose of Bavinck's theocentric elaboration on human nature is to confirm that "the knowledge that God has revealed ... [concerns] himself and all creatures as they stand in relation to him."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ *RD*, 1:38.

Seeking A Dialogue in Antagonistic Collisions

The first two sections expounded Mou's and Bavinck's theories of human nature. Thus far, given Mou's antagonism to Christian faith, it is evident that there are incompatibilities between them. However, this does not eliminate any possibility for building a dialogue between the two. In this section, I will first analyze the collisions, before articulating a dialogue between them.

I Unavoidable Collisions between Bavinck and Mou

The collisions between Bavinck and Mou, admittedly, seem unavoidable. This situation is determined by an essential impasse: Bavinck's theocentric elaboration on human nature against Mou's anthropocentric and optimistic elaboration on human nature.

Mou himself refuses to view his Confucianism as optimistic or pessimistic. He contends that Confucianism is beyond optimism and pessimism, because on the one hand moral pursuits depend on human innate goodness (against pessimism) and on the other hand the progress of the pursuit is infinite (against optimism).¹⁰² Nonetheless, Mou's theory of human nature is still optimistic insofar as it is closely linked to anthropocentrism.

Defining Mou's theory as optimistic is not simply due to his insistence on human innate goodness; the cardinal and essential cause is his assertion on the moral subjectivity of humans. Tu Wei-ming, a new Confucian scholars and former student of Mou, defends Mou's stance, arguing that his teacher does not argue for anthropocentrism insofar as it involves the "cosmic creativity," that is, the heavenly decree.¹⁰³ However, it is undeniable that Mou does not view the cosmic creativity or heavenly decree as an objective counterpart to human beings. Rather, Mou insists on the immanentization of the descending heavenly decree into human beings so as to justify human moral creativity and then to undergird human moral subjectivity. As N. Serina Chan remarks, Mou holds "a strong faith in the moral perfectibility of humanity."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² YSL, 115.

¹⁰³ Tu, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*, 111-2.

¹⁰⁴ N. Serina Chan, "What Is Confucian and New about the Thought of Mou Zongsan?" in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 159.

This perfectibility eventually results in an optimistic attitude to the issue of evil. Therefore, Mou holds an exceedingly optimistic estimation: regardless of the infinite progress of overcoming evil, theoretically human moral reason eventually resolves the issues of evil and actualizes human sageliness because of human infinite wisdom heart-mind.¹⁰⁵ Bunnin insightfully points out that Mou “is committed to a Confucian conception of moral transformation through which a small person can transcend himself to become ... a sage, however rarely this last goal is reached.”¹⁰⁶

Conversely, Bavinck’s theocentric elaboration on human nature excludes human moral subjectivity. On the one hand, the doctrine of creation sets ‘God’ as the foundation of the being of humans and the sustainer of human nature. That means Bavinck adopts a creational ontology to expound human existence and being. The createdness signifies human contingency, which is diametrically against the claim of human absoluteness. Thus, Bavinck employs different ontological terms to describe God and humans: God is being, but humans are becoming, which presupposes “a cause” for humans.¹⁰⁷ God and humans as belonging to “separate, mutually exclusive ontological categories.”¹⁰⁸ The ontological differentiation between God and humankind is an underlying principle of Bavinck’s theocentric elaboration on human nature.

On the other hand, the doctrine of salvation in Christ confirms that only God can restore human nature. Bavinck’s theology of original sin makes the restoration of human nature requisite for humans. With the theory of the broader *imago Dei* and the narrower *imago Dei*, Bavinck establishes an unbreakable relationship between God’s redemptive work in Christ and the restoration of the human *imago Dei*. This relationship unambiguously reflects humanity’s entire dependence on Christ’s salvation. There is no role of human moral praxis in the

¹⁰⁵ ZZDT, 69, 93; see YSL, 236.

¹⁰⁶ Bunnin, ‘God’s Knowledge and Ours,’ 53.

¹⁰⁷ RD, 2:30, 154, 158.

¹⁰⁸ James Eglinton, “To Be or to Become - That Is the Question: Locating the Actualistic in Bavinck’s Ontology,” in *Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 111.

restoration of human nature because of the divine initiative of human salvation. Bavinck's theocentric elaboration nullifies any defense of human moral subjectivity or efforts in the regain of the *imago Dei*.

In short, the comparison between Mou's and Bavinck's theories of human nature expresses the fact that the fundamental collision between them are explicit. Mou's anthropocentric and optimistic elaboration on human nature inevitably contradicts Bavinck's theocentric elaboration.

II The Approaches to Articulating a Dialogue between Bavinck and Mou

At first glance, considering Mou's absolute antagonism to Christian faith the irreconcilable collision between them, a dialogical relationship between them seems impossible. If Mou's anthropocentrism were replaced by Bavinck's theocentrism, Mou's moral metaphysics would disintegrate, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the dialogue between them can still be established. There are at least three approaches to articulating a dialogue between their respective theories of human nature.

A. Bavinck's 'God' differs from Kant's 'God'

Mou does not hesitate to reject Kant's notion of God. He regards 'God' as an illusionary idea, and claims that moral metaphysics does not necessitate the notion of God. Hence, Mou turns to human beings and supersedes 'God' with human infinite wisdom heart-mind. For Bavinck God is the ontic basis of human beings. Are their views really incompatible?

Actually, the incompatibility can be resolved by differentiating Bavinck's 'God' from Kant's 'God.' Kant's moral theology has to view God as the foundation of morality; God is the cause and basis of achieving the *summum bonum*. Notably, the meaning of 'foundation' should be clarified. Mou critiques Kant that the 'foundation' is in the sense that the notion of God can ensure the possibility of the realization of the *summum bonum*. Specifically, Kant's 'God' is "a subjective posit required to make sense of the moral law, rather than a real being somehow

behind it.”¹⁰⁹ In Kant’s view, morality necessitates the existence of God, not vice versa. This can be seen in his letter to Johann Casper Lavater:

...righteousness is the sum of all religion and that we ought to seek it with all our might, having faith (that is, an unconditional trust) that God will then supplement our efforts and supply the good that is not in our power.¹¹⁰

Recognizing human incapacity to obtain the *summum bonum*, Kant argues that human moral effort should be remedied by God. In this sense, the ‘God’ rejected and criticized by Mou is the one that is the consequence of human morality. In other words, God exists because humans are moral.

In Bavinck’s view, Kant’s argument for God belongs to a moral argument God’s existence.¹¹¹ Bavinck never directly equates the ‘God’ of natural theology with the triune God of Christianity, though he claims that the triune God shines his glory upon nature.¹¹² Thus, although Mou repudiates Kant’s God, it is illegitimate for him to denounce Bavinck’s God. To put differently, even though Mou elaborates and critiques the notions of Jesus, God the Son and revelation, he cannot identify Kant’s ‘God’ with the triune God of Christianity.¹¹³ Moreover, given that Mou replaces Kant’s God with human infinite wisdom heart-mind, he now needs to consider whether the infinite wisdom heart-mind may be superseded by Bavinck’s God.

Bavinck must insist on God rather than turn to the infinite wisdom heart-mind because of God’s absoluteness and creation. That means the conflict between Mou and Bavinck remains. Nonetheless, the differentiation between Bavinck’s God and Kant’s God changes the direct collision to the indirect. Mou does need to reconsider the feasibility of his moral metaphysics

¹⁰⁹ Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 126.

¹¹⁰ Kant, *Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155.

¹¹¹ *RD*, 2:85-7.

¹¹² *RD*, 2:89-91.

¹¹³ Mou misunderstands these doctrines, and appears to identify Christianity’s ‘God’ with Kant’s ‘God,’ see *ZZDT*, 28, 38, 41, 56, 86-7, 94-6; *YSL*, 183, 189-98.

in confrontation with Bavinck's theocentric theology of human nature. This differentiation creates a buffering place for articulating a dialogical relationship between Mou and Bavinck.

B. The Imago Dei parallels with the descending of heavenly decree

After creating the buffering place, several similarities between Bavinck's and Mou's elaborations on human nature come to the fore, which can strengthen the dialogical relationship between them. An outstanding resemblance exists between Bavinck's theology of the *imago Dei* and Mou's theory of the descending of the heavenly decree, which consists in ontological and moral aspects.

In the ontological aspect, both the *imago Dei* and the heavenly decree are related to the being of humans, though they constitute human nature in divergent ways. In Mou's philosophy, the transcendent and impersonal heavenly decree descends into human beings as constitutive of human nature. The descending process refers to immanentization, that is, the absorption of the noumenon of the heavenly decree as human nature. Hence, the immanentized transcendent heavenly decree ontologically constitutes human nature. In Bavinck's theology, the true *imago Dei* is intratrinitarian: Christ is the true *imago Dei*. Through God's creation, the image of the intratrinitarian *imago Dei* is immanentized into human beings in the sense of communication.¹¹⁴ This means the transcendent *imago Dei* is ontologically related to human nature, but not in the sense of human absorption.

In the moral aspect, both the *imago Dei* and the heavenly decree are concerned with morality. Mou employs the concept of benevolence to expound the heavenly decree so as to identify benevolence with the heavenly decree, which in his philosophy is moral creativity *per se*. Hence, the heavenly decree, which is the inner benevolence of human being, is the fountain of moral value. In Bavinck's view, a key content of the *imago Dei* is the moral quality, that is,

¹¹⁴ RD, 2:276, 420.

the righteousness and holiness endowed by God at the time of being created. Thus, he describes the loss of the narrower *imago Dei* (the human nature after the fall) as “moral depravity.”¹¹⁵

These two parallels can be regarded as the breakthrough in the dialogical relationship between Mou and Bavinck. We can express Bavinck’s theology of the *imago Dei* in the form of the descending heavenly decree on one hand, and on the other hand consider whether Mou’s theory of the descending heavenly decree can obtain benefits from the theology of the *imago Dei*. The former consideration is significant for the indigenization of Bavinck’s theology in Chinese culture, and can be implemented by the parallelism between Mou’s heavenly decree and Bavinck’s *imago Dei*. As to the latter, there are two aspects where Bavinck’s ‘*imago Dei*’ can refine and supplement Mou’s ‘heavenly decree.’

First, although Mou employs the notion of the heavenly decree to expound human nature, his definition is rather vague. He defines it as a standard, being qualified by ‘imperishable,’ ‘unchangeable’ and ‘imperceptibly.’¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding that Mou identifies benevolence with the heavenly decree, it is explicit that he refrains from expounding the essence of this standard. Hence, the heavenly decree tends to be viewed as impersonal. As transcendent and immanentized as the heavenly decree, the *imago Dei*, which was bestowed by the triune God, can provide a further elaboration for enriching the essence of the heavenly decree. The immanentization of the heavenly decree can be endued with the meaning of personalization. Then, the heavenly decree is more ontologically associated with the being of humans.

Second, the *imago Dei* in the sense of creational ontology can supplement the heavenly decree in the sense of moral ontology. Mou confines the heavenly decree almost to the moral sphere so that the immanentized heavenly decree is just a moral substance. Moreover, he insists

¹¹⁵ *RD*, 3:101.

¹¹⁶ *ZZDT*, 16.

on the moral creativity of the immanentized heavenly decree (human nature). In this sense, Mou's moral ontology makes the human being the basis of the being of everything.

Here are two issues about moral ontology. First, insofar as the self-cultivation and the gradual realization of inner sageliness in Mou's moral philosophy implies the changeability of human being, how is the changeable being the ontic foundation of things? Speaking in Bavinck's language, "all that changes ceases to be what it was."¹¹⁷ In other words, anything changeable cannot be the ontic basis of other beings. Otherwise, every being will fall into an absolutely relative state in the changeable process. Then, moral value also becomes relative, which is contradictory to Mou's insistence on the universality of human nature and inner benevolence. Thus, Mou's moral ontology cannot expound the being of human.

Moreover, Mou's moral ontology is problematic because he subordinates ontology to ethics. As Yang Zebo remarks, the moral heart-mind in Mou's philosophy is a living being, which can create a moral being.¹¹⁸ In Mou's estimation, ontology depends on ethics. Nevertheless, the problem is that, the terminologies of ethics are used to qualify 'being,' whereas 'being' is not merely qualified by the languages of ethics. For instance, the being of human can be qualified by 'moral': man is a moral being. Likewise, the human being also can be qualified by 'spiritual': man is a spiritual being. That means the language of ethics are one of the qualifications of the being of things, reflecting characters and attributes of being in moral respect. Therefore, Mou's moral ontology cannot constitute an ontic foundation of human nature.

These two issues can be resolved by Bavinck's '*imago Dei*' in the sense of creational ontology, which not only expounds the being of humanity in a moral sense but is also the ontic basis of humans. In short, Bavinck's '*imago Dei*' in the sense of creational ontology can

¹¹⁷ RD, 2:154.

¹¹⁸ Yang Zebo, "Mou Zongsan yuanshan sixiang de yiyi yu quexian," *Journal of Yunnan University (Social Science Edition)* 10 no.2 (2011): 37.

remove the ontological weakness of Mou's moral philosophy. Mou's heavenly decree could be viewed as equal to the image of the transcendent *imago Dei*, which is inbuilt human nature. Besides, the *imago Dei* expressed in the form of the heavenly decree can be the catalyst of the development of the dialogical relationship between Mou and Bavinck.

C. Bavinck's political theology and Mou's outer kingliness

Mou's moral philosophy heavily stresses the political dimension, which can be summarized as outer kingliness. The kingliness is concerned with democracy and science, which is the consequence of the realization of inner sageliness through self-cultivation for the purpose of saving and revitalizing China. It is evident that Mou's outer kingliness is characterized by individualism, which particularly highlights individual moral efforts. This moral praxis will contribute to the construction of a community, in a broad sense, namely a nation. Apparently, Mou adopts the pattern of individual-to-community to elaborate outer kingliness. Yet, he does not elaborate on the relationship between one's outer kingliness and the kingliness of others. He seems arbitrary in holding the view that every individual agrees with the same implication of the outer kingliness. He ignores a fact that various people may hold different notions of democracy and science. Therefore, in Mou's moral philosophy, the realization of outer kingliness is ultimately in an individual sense.

Moreover, although Mou metaphysically and abstractly defines evil as the consequence of the reflection of moral good, he materializes evil within the political and cultural dimensions. His 'outer kingliness' simplifies and reduces the problem of evil to political and social issues so as to deal with the cultural and political crisis in China. His failure to construe the multifaceted causes of evil leads to a politically and culturally sinocentric outer kingliness.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Tu Wei-ming goes beyond Mou by emphasizing the worldly religiousness of Confucianism; see Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 93-121.

In this regard, Bavinck's organicism is an appropriate supplement to Mou's outer kingliness. Bavinck critiques the non-Christian worldview that it "lacks the concept of humanity as a single interrelated *organism* and could never come up with the idea of a kingdom in which both the individual and the group would develop their full identities."¹²⁰ Bavinck here articulates an organic relationship between individual and community by the notion of the Kingdom. The Kingdom, which is the highest good, is intimately connected to every aspect of life. It definitely includes political life. Hence, the organic relationship also involves Bavinck's political theology. The pivotal point of this organic relationship between individual and community in the political dimension is the highest good, which is God. As has been elaborated, Bavinck's God should be differentiated from Kant's God. That means the individualism of Mou's outer kingliness can be refined by Bavinck's God. One refinement is that the outer kingliness is no longer limited to one particular culture – Chinese culture. Rather, it extends to the international dimension and the community of all humans because of "the catholicity of God's [K]ingdom."¹²¹ In so doing, a tendency to cultural discrimination in Mou's philosophy that Chinese culture is superior than other cultures can be eliminated.

What is more, Bavinck's view of politics can enrich Mou's political view of evil. Bavinck contends that politics belongs to the circle of human culture, which aims to "[realize] objectively [human] ideals of the true, the good, and the beautiful."¹²² Therefore, politics correlates with various human activities, such as economics, science and religion. Besides, he maintains that "it is historically proved that culture ... from its first commencement is bound up with religion in the closest way."¹²³ That means politics cannot disengage from religion. Rather, political issues are associated with religious aspects. In so doing, Mou's simplified and

¹²⁰ Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good," 135 (italics added).

¹²¹ Herman Bavinck, "Ethics and Politics," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 277.

¹²² Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), 250.

¹²³ Bavinck, *Revelation*, 259.

materialistic theory of evil can be supplemented by concrete metaphysical elements. In Bavinck's view, these elements are undoubtedly the *imago Dei*, Christ and God.

III Conclusion

Mou's moral philosophy is characterized by moral subjectivity and autonomy, which reflects his anthropocentrism and optimism. His exposition on human nature is to confirm the absolute transcendence of humanity and the innate goodness of human nature. As against Mou, Bavinck holds to the theocentric theology of human nature. His emphasis is not put on humanity; alternatively, it is on God. His aim is to spell out the relationship between God and humankind: humanity is the *imago Dei*, who once fell before God and can only be restored in Christ.

Although it is explicit that there is a fundamental collision between Mou and Bavinck, a dialogue between them still can be achieved by creating a buffer zone, that is, the differentiation between Kant's God and Bavinck's God. Then, the similarity between the descending heavenly decree and the *imago Dei* can promote the articulation of their dialogical relationship. On the one hand, the latter can be expressed with the form of the former in Chinese culture; on the other hand, the former can be supplemented and polished by the latter. Moreover, Mou's outer kingliness can also obtain benefits from Bavinck's political theology and organicism so that it can extend to an international dimension and incorporate metaphysical elements to enrich his moral metaphysics.