



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Composing Integrity:
An Approach to Moral Agency for Asian Americans**

Sharon M. Tan

stan@unitedseminary.edu

Part of
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez

In the globalized, post industrial 21st century, many people live concurrently in different worlds and cultures. They have transnational life experiences and multicultural relationships. Because of the impact of these differing experiences, cultures, and relationships, they can hold simultaneously different and even conflicting values and norms as well as

conflicting hermeneutics and interpretations of their experiences. Asian Americans¹ are a prime example of such persons: Asian Americans live simultaneously as Asians-in-America and Americans-of-Asian-ethnicity, and perhaps even with additional identities (if they also participate in other cultures). They often experience dissonance between their inner thoughts and interpretations (which may themselves conflict) and outer acculturation and accommodation to the dominant culture that may lead to moral confusion. This confusion, coupled with cultural powerlessness, can debilitate moral voice and agency or be rationalized into moral relativism and emotivism.²

Asian American theology ascribes this debilitation in large part to the marginalization of Asian Americans by race, ethnicity, and culture. Asian Americans live *in-between* cultures, not fully Asian, and not fully American. In his book *Out of Silence*, Fumitaka Matsuoka describes Asian Americans as “poised in uncertainty and ambiguity between two or more social constructs, reflecting in the soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions.”³

¹ Asian Americans come from a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities: East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean); South Asians (Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan); South-east Asians (Vietnamese, Hmong, Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean, Filipino, etc.). They adhere to a wide variety of religions (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Daoist, Christian, Sikh, etc.) Many of these ethnic or religious groups experience strife with each other in their countries of origin. Thus, one might as well question combining these diverse peoples into a single category for purposes of this article. However, these diverse peoples are often treated as a single group “Asian Americans” in North American culture. This is a signature experience that is perhaps unique to life in this nation and which fundamentally forms the identity of Americans of Asian origin. Thus, I will treat “Asian Americans” as a group, discussing the attendant moral implications as an important theme in this article.

² In *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), Alisdair MacIntyre proposes that when there is no justification for the liberal individualist worldview, moral confusion prevails, and moral justifications degenerate into emotivism and relativism.

³ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 54.

Marginality, however, has a silver lining. Although the terms liminality and marginality have often been used interchangeably, Sang Hyun Lee proposes that liminality is marginality with a creative edge, or a marginality that is open to creative possibilities.⁴ Likewise, in this essay, I will use the term liminal to suggest the creative, agentic and powerful dimension of marginality. The experience of marginality can provide a creative opportunity to develop a moral agency that attends and responds to the particularities of Asian Americans.⁵ Asian Americans can create a sense of identity from their experiences of liminality by—and perhaps *only* by—cultivating their own integrity through moral imagination and moral action.

In this essay, I propose “complex integrity” as a creative and imaginative practice in which people author their personal moral narrative within their particular social and moral context and, in so authoring, take responsibility for their moral future. This involves discerning between the disparate values and perspectives one experiences, weaving these values and perspectives together to cultivate a moral identity, and acting to create a desired moral future. The practice of complex integrity fosters moral agency, or moral power, in two ways: first, it cultivates a wholeness and clarity of moral vision and character through prioritizing interpretations and discerning moral claims upon oneself, and second, it provides impetus for moral action toward social justice and reconciliation.

⁴ Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 4.

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 60, argues that the question that we should ask ourselves is not what is the goal or law of the situation, but first of all, “what is going on?” This marks a method for ethics that is contextual and is attentive to history and experience rather than abstract principles.

Asians in America live as strangers or visitors in a foreign land: they come out of the world that formed them or the world that formed their parents, and are deeply influenced by Asian cultures. As Americans of Asian ethnicity, they are viewed as minorities in the dominant culture, which in turn defines and shapes them as such. And eventually, for an immigrant or her or his family, there will at some point be a transition in identity from that of “Asian-in-America” to that of “American-of-Asian-ethnicity.” This transition in identity has significant moral impact, because it entails an acceptance of the social and racial category by which the dominant society and culture views and classifies them, identification with other Asians not of the same ethnic, religious, cultural, or national background, and perhaps even identification with those groups with whom they were at enmity in their countries of origin. For example, Japanese and other Asians were on opposite sides of World War II, an event in the living memory and family history of Asians-in-America. For one to be classified as Asian American would be to identify with Japanese-Americans whose relatives conquered and tortured one’s family members. Similarly, it would mean association of Indians, Sikhs, and Pakistanis with each other, groups with similar ethnic origins but widely divergent religious beliefs and a history of religious conflict. And it would mean identification among groups who differ in ethnicity, culture and religion, and have no common history—not even in colonization—simply because the dominant culture classifies them by origination in the vast continent of Asia.

Because Asian Americans live in-between cultures, there is no single theological, religious, or cultural meta-narrative that adequately interprets their lives in the 21st century. Multiple cultures and sources compete for priority in moral decision making. Such dilemmas

lead many Asians living in Western cultures to a moral pragmatism and utilitarianism which can lead into moral relativism and moral disempowerment. In *The Remains of the Day*, novelist Kazuo Ishiguro tells of an English man so consumed by his desire to be a great and loyal butler that he does not recognize or question his employer's rising Nazi sympathies. Ishiguro, a Japanese-Briton, describes the butler as displaying both the profound moral passivity and emotional disconnectedness arising from the juxtaposition of conflicting moral norms.

This essay suggests that complex integrity is a practice and virtue that could guide one through the moral maze that Asian Americans and other persons experience. It is a form of doing ethics that is attentive to the particular contexts and stories that Asian Americans and others find themselves in, providing a vision of a moral future that follows with integrity from the past and present.

The Agency Gap in Asian American Theologies of Identity

The dissonance and ambiguity of split moral loyalties in the Asian American soul has several sources. The first is globalization, which brings into proximity and juxtaposes different cultures not only in a single lifetime but in a single day. The second is the moral and social location of Asian Americans in North American culture where they occupy positions of partial privilege and partial oppression.

Globalization and Asian American Experience

Globalization shapes the Asian American experience in three ways: in their experiences as middleman minorities, as model minorities, and in their experience of transnationalism. As these experiences have been described by others extensively, I treat them here in summary form.

Middleman minorities

Asian Americans are informed not only by their own experiences, but also by the experiences of their relatives and fellow nationals in the rest of the world. The Asian diaspora have often been cast in the role of “middleman minority” in the different societies in which they have settled. Middleman minority groups may have frequent economic success but they are politically impotent. They function as economic intermediaries between the culturally, politically or economically dominant and subordinate groups.⁶ They do this by filling certain professional or specialty roles in the economy, usually prescribed by the dominant culture. The term was originally used for Jews in Europe, but expanded to include trading groups in Africa and Asia, as well as Asian and other small businesses in the United States.⁷ Although they act as buffers, there is frequently a societal backlash against them, as is evident in anti-Semitism or anti-Chinese sentiment.⁸

Model minorities

In a variation of the middleman minority status, Asian Americans in the United States have also been categorized as model minorities.⁹ This term refers to a societal group that is economically self-sufficient and relatively crime-free with values synchronistic with the

⁶ Walter P. Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), xii.

⁷ Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle*, 5-8; Jonathan Tan, *Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008), 39.

⁸ Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle*, 59.

⁹ Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 37.

dominant culture. Although apparently laudatory, this designation actually maintains and legitimizes institutional racism. It denigrates other races or cultures by implying that Asian Americans are the normative immigrant group; other groups that have not achieved economic success in the same way are therefore inferior. The appearance of economic success is often deceptive because it fails to note the higher percentage of Asian American household members participating in the labor market to offset lower per capita income. The term “model minority” in fact acts as a glass ceiling, veiling discrimination and other real problems.¹⁰ It also carries the implication that Asian Americans are “innately foreign” and not assimilable.¹¹

Transnationalism

Immigration patterns in the 21st century entail multiple types of relationships between one’s country of origin and one’s resident country. New technology (for example cell phones, Skype, email, and Facebook) means that communication with extended family across continents is no longer solely the privilege of the upper classes. This has led to a hybridized and multidimensional transnational identity, one which is both rooted in the United States and connected with family in Asia.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 22-23.

¹¹ Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle*, 25-26; Rita Nakashima Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” in Roger A. Badham, ed., *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* 183-196 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 185.

¹² Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 55-56.

Asian American Identity and Agency

The moral and social experience of Asian Americans in the United States, formed by globalization and experienced as marginality, contributes to the nature of their moral agency. Yet, while marginality is the source of moral disempowerment, its creative twin liminality can be the source of moral agency.

Marginalization as Shaping Identity

The descriptions of Asian American identity and experience—middleman minority, model minority and transnationalism—coalesce in the notion of marginality. Middleman minorities are marginal because they function between the economically dominant and subordinate. Model minorities are marginal because they are tolerated as economically acceptable and self sufficient, but remain socially excluded. Transnational relationships lead to a sense of marginality when Asians maintain relationships and therefore social and moral obligations in different cultures and worlds, and obligations in one world prevent acculturation in the others.

Peter Phan calls these experiences “betwixt and between,” or sites of intercultural encounters where premodernity, modernity and postmodernity intersect.¹³ Marginalization has been also described as a form of oppression. Jung Young Lee characterizes the experience of

¹³ Peter Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003) ,10.

Asian Americans as marginalization,¹⁴ as does Inn Sook Lee with the experience of Korean American women.¹⁵ Matsuoka calls it a “deep spiritual pain” which arises from the

unresolvable conflict between the impossibility of letting go of one’s own ethnic, cultural, and ancestral belonging and at the same time realizing that the assertion of one’s own particularity is perceived as deviance by the society at large.¹⁶

He continues:

A liminal [or marginal] person is one who has internalized the norms of a particular group but is not completely recognized by the members of that group as being a legitimate member. As long as this relationship prevails, one’s role in countless situations will be ill-defined, or defined in different ways by the individual and the group as a whole. Such liminality leads to uncertainty, ambivalence, and the fear of rejection and failure.¹⁷

But there is more. There is an added dimension to Asian American experience when an Asian living in the United States, either in the first generation or, often, in the transition to the second generation, starts to identify him or herself as “Asian American.” Since this new identity as Asian American is racially defined, the transition is a form of *racialization*. In the transition to an American identity, one’s ethnic and socio-political identity is transformed into a racial identity. In addition to the conflict between the cultures of the old world and the new world, the Asian American experience now also includes an identification with other Asians in North

¹⁴ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Inn Sook Lee, *Passage to the Real Self: the Development of Self Integration for Asian American Women* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009).

¹⁶ Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

American society who are dissimilar in ethnicity.¹⁸ The Asian-living-in-America now must negotiate both cultural identity as an American, and a racial identity as “Asian” and as a “person of color.” Such a person could navigate the moral dimensions of both identities with complex integrity if they could accept the benefits and minimize the disadvantages of each identity without allowing one identity to dominate the other.

The racialization that Asian Americans experience is a further form of marginalization. If the Asian–living-in-America is marginalized by culture, religion, and/or national origin, the Asian American is marginalized by race. In other words, the adoption of Asian American identity by a person is an implicit recognition *and acceptance* of the way race shapes U.S. society. One with complex integrity would be able to author a moral identity that responds with responsibility and agency to this racialization.

Liminality as Shaping Moral Agency

Despite the perception that Asian Americans have some social power because of their lighter skin and model minority status, their experience of marginalization has impacted their moral agency by creating confusion and silencing their voices. The experience of marginality as oppressive has led Asian Americans to draw deeply from liberation theology.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, when my neighbor’s house went up for sale, I wondered with my children who would move in. I wondered aloud if it would be a Chinese or South Indian family (similar to those I grew up with in Malaysia, in addition to Malays). My three-year-old corrected me very firmly, “we just want children, any skin.” This illustrates the difference between my first generation Asian-in-America self and my second generation American-of-Asian ethnicity children due to the transition in identity—whilst I focused on the ethnicity and culture of the adults, my children assumed that the culture of the *children* would be one they all shared despite differing ethnicity.

¹⁹ Lee, *Marginality*, 23-29; Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 111; Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 121-142.

Liberation theologies tend to dichotomize the moral world between dominant and marginalized groups or between the oppressor and the oppressed. Within this dichotomous way of seeing the world, Asian Americans, depending on their national origin, socio-economic location and immigration experience, generally identify either with the dominant culture, or more often perhaps, with the marginalized.

This dichotomy between dominant and marginalized, oppressor and oppressed, does not adequately describe the Asian American experience. The characterization of Asian American experience as “betwixt and between” not only describes a type of marginalization, *it also describes a situation of privilege*. In other words, Asian Americans are simultaneously both marginal and dominant.

Since dominant and minority or marginal status is relative, people and groups can be simultaneously dominant and marginal in different spheres.²⁰ As Asian Americans function as a middleman minority economic “buffer” between the dominant white culture and other less privileged cultures, they partake of both cultural characteristics, but belong wholly to neither. As Asian Americans inhabit the model minority designation, they suffer from discrimination because of their “minority” status, but also benefit from a certain racial and cultural tolerance because of the “model” status. In transnational contexts, although they are not white, they bear the privilege of being U.S. citizens.

This situation of partial marginalization and partial privilege has a specific shape and characteristic. Although it takes on different characteristics in different parts of the country and

²⁰ Martin Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives* 4th ed. (Beverly, Mass.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1997), 52-53.

in different socio-economic spheres of life, generally, the partial privilege is racial and economic. For example, Asians are not as dark-skinned as some other groups, and Asian women (but less often Asian men, with a few exceptions) are sometimes portrayed in media as beautiful and sexually desirable. The partial economic privilege emerges from several factors: Asian immigration in the late 20th century was generally voluntary,²¹ and screened by the U.S. government for those with specific skills.²² The large percentage of professional and educated elites, and extensive kinship networks produced relative economic success. There are significant exceptions, but the successes have been more noted than the failures. Except for U.S. citizenship, however, economic success has not come with political privilege²³ nor has it allowed cultural assimilation. In contrast, African Americans in certain parts of the country, for example, Atlanta, have more political power but not the racial privilege or economic success.

Recent scholarship in Asian American theology is moving beyond idealized notions of culture and identity toward recognizing more fluid, conflicted, and complex notions of identity.²⁴ Asian Americans realize they must negotiate between the cultures in which they simultaneously

²¹ Ogbu has categorized the minority groups in the United States as “voluntary” and involuntary. Voluntary minority groups are those who have immigrated into the United States, and see the United States as a land of opportunity, working toward economic goals that are not available in their home countries. They are more willing to assimilate and work to achieve economic success or success in school. Involuntary minorities are those that have been conquered and made a minority against their will, for example, African Americans and certain Hispanic Americans. They are more prone to resist identification with the dominant group and see success in school as a betrayal of their own culture in favor of the dominant culture. John Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

²² Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 69-82.

²³ Greg Oswald, *Race and Ethnic Relations in Today's America* (London: Ashgate, 2001), 138-142.

²⁴ Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 171.

live.²⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock calls this “holy insecurity,” that is, a complex cross cultural identity with multilayered experience of dominance and subordination.²⁶

Although marginalization has been a source of disempowerment, it can also be a source of moral empowerment. In fact, it is only out of a realization of our complex notions of identity, out of recognition that we have both partial power and partial oppression, that we can find liminality, the creative and powerful aspect to marginalization. Out of this liminality we can develop a moral agency that is particular to the Asian American experience. Our experience as Asian Americans differs from that of the dominant white culture and the other subordinate minority cultures. Thus, we must recognize that we have different interpretations and thus different *responsibilities* from both the dominant and other subordinate groups.²⁷

Asian American moral agency must respond to both the experiences and interpretations of our partial power and of our partial oppression. In other words, we must be attentive to, responsive to and responsible for the fact of partial privilege. In particular, we have a responsibility to connect that partial privilege to our partial oppression.²⁸ This is the task of

²⁵ See Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face*, 10-21; Lee, *Marginality*, 23-29.

²⁶ Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” 183-19.

²⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr suggests that a moral agent acts in response to the world around him or her, in interpretation of action upon him or her, in anticipation of the responses to his or her responses, and in social solidarity with others. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 61-65.

²⁸ This responsibility reflects the biblical tradition connecting lament and prophecy. The biblical prophets connected their prophetic power and utterances with the particular griefs of their time and experience. For example, Jeremiah mourned the wickedness of Israel on behalf of God by acting it out (Jeremiah 7-9). The story of Hosea is especially poignant: his unfaithful wife is compared to unfaithful Israel, and his mourning and call to his wife to repent expresses God’s mourning and call to Israel to repent.

complex integrity: we have the responsibility to use our partial privilege to ameliorate the oppression of others. The particular pain of oppression we feel is a call to us to work for justice for others suffering similar and worse pain.

There are two aspects to fulfilling our responsibilities due to partial privilege. First, we have to develop *intercultural conscience*; that is, to do the intrapersonal work to prioritize the conflicting cultural and moral claims we experience and to respond appropriately, or *justly*, to the culturally divided and divisive claims on us. Second, we are to strive for wholeness between our inner and outer selves, between our character and our action. We must be able to harness our partial power to work toward justice and reconciliation for those more oppressed than ourselves. The practice through which this takes place is *complex integrity*.

Complex Integrity

Integrity is generally understood as involving honesty and wholeness of body, soul and spirit, or body and mind. It is personal character work that consists of discerning “right from wrong,” clarifying one’s convictions and morals, and then expressing them in moral action. The notion of integrity is relatively simple, if not easily achieved, in a monocultural setting where norms and values are fairly clear and unquestioned. A person of integrity is one who is honest and good with both internal and external consistency of principle, word and action.²⁹

The work toward integrity becomes more difficult when moral principles or expectations conflict, when the culture is not seamless, when the convictions and morals of a lifetime have

²⁹ See Mark Halfon, *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 4-5.

come under question, or when there are varying answers to moral questions of character.

Complex integrity describes a virtue that multicultural people living in multicultural societies need to cultivate to realize their moral agency and empower their moral selves. To understand its full implications, it may be helpful to contrast it with “simple integrity.”

Simple integrity

Integrity, generally understood, has two parts: the notion of honesty and moral reflection and the notion of wholeness, which is consistency of belief and action. For example, Stephen Carter defines integrity as “a difficult process of discerning one’s deepest understanding of right and wrong, . . . [that] then further requires action consistent with what one has learned.”³⁰ This notion of integrity includes a (Kantian) duty to follow principle.³¹ Integrity involves honesty and consistency; it is consonance between the inner self of belief and principle and the outer self of word and action. This is the understanding of integrity emphasized in much of the political and business literature on integrity.

As a search for the “*deepest* understanding of right and wrong,” this understanding of integrity carries an implicit assumption that the determination of what is right and wrong is made with reference to the norms and values of a single culture or relatively consonant group of cultures. Asian Americans, however, do not live in such a monocultural or consonant world. For example, traditional spiritual beliefs and practices often conflict with Western medicine and

³⁰ Stephen Carter, *Integrity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

technology.³² In another example, Asian Christianity often differs from Western Christianity. If Asian Americans attend predominantly white or culturally white churches, their Asian expressions of spirituality or morality may not be supported. Conversely, if they attend predominantly Asian churches, they may chafe at the hierarchical or traditional values and expectations. In another instance, because Asian character values of humility and self deference are not valued in North American culture and workplaces, Asians may have to assume Western values and character traits in order to succeed, which may in turn cause personal dissonance. Further, conflicts arise when unspoken values nevertheless profoundly shape family interactions. For example, is a first born son (or daughter, when there are no sons) who leaves the home to strike a life for himself in another city independent, ambitious and entrepreneurial for breaking with dying tradition and establishing a career and a new paradigm of relationships (North American values), or he or she *cowardly* and *selfish* for not shouldering the burden of caring for and relating to aging parents (Confucian values)?

In addition to honesty, consistency, and wholeness within the norms of the dominant culture, we must negotiate the dissonance between the different cultures that we are a part of and loyal to. Thus integrity requires a more complex understanding of wholeness, and has particular contexts and narratives. Since Asian Americans participate in a wide variety of experiences and cultures, what might be integrity will even vary from person to person.

³² See, for example, the account in Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

Brock proposes an “interstitial integrity” that eloquently describes the experience of Asian Americans navigating multiple cultures. To live in interstitial integrity is to be able to live in the tension of multiple worlds, and to find meaning

by refusing to disconnect from any of them, while not pledging allegiance to a singular one. It allows space for the multiple social locations of identity in a multicultural context. . . . Interstitial integrity allows us to evaluate our behavior and exercise moral discrimination and self-evaluation. But because we live in the interstices, we must also engage in solidarity with others who also live in the interstices.³³

Brock seems to suggest that Asian Americans possess this integrity by the simple virtue of living in different worlds. In other words, interstitial integrity is not a moral process or virtue, but a theological characteristic that describes identity and an ethical way of being. However, she does not propose a way of achieving the self-understanding and acceptance that she describes.

Complex integrity

Through “complex integrity” we can cultivate and develop the moral agency that we need to live in this multi-moral world. It is a virtue—a habit or practice that leads to human flourishing—that reconciles the different parts of our moral selves which are subject to different cultural loyalties and moral norms. Complex integrity imagines and creatively works toward a new and desired moral future rather than in adherence to a single tradition or interpretation of the past. Complex integrity is creative and personal: it need not be individualistic, but since it has to do with the character of the individual that is navigating the multiculturalism of the globalized 21st century world, it is personal.

³³ Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” 191.

William James suggests that we can live into what we believe by acting accordingly and thereby making it “true.”³⁴ This is the neo-pragmatic premise of complex integrity: we create our integrated identity by imagining it and acting into it. We must attend simultaneously to both the internal dispositions of character and the external moral actions that display that character. Complex integrity thus synchronizes questions of character and moral action. We love God *and* we love our neighbor as ourselves.³⁵ In fact, loving God and loving neighbor is each made possible only by the other.

The prerequisites to complex integrity are cognitive flexibility and epistemological humility. This reminds us that all theological and moral systems are humanly *constructed*—as are one’s particular interpretations, understandings and loyalties—and thus subject to negotiation and prioritization. As in Gandhi’s notion of nonviolence, we understand that Truth exists; but because we do not know it absolutely, we cannot force our idea of truth upon others.³⁶ Likewise, we cannot force one cultural idea of truth onto our own divided selves, further subjecting our minds and hearts to violence and cultural imperialism. Rather, the principle of non-violence implies that we accept and even embrace our bi- or multi-cultural lives with their contrasting and even conflicting truths and norms.

³⁴ William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

³⁵ See discussion of virtue ethics in Maureen H. O’Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2009) 45-46.

³⁶ Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 20, 31-32.

Reconciliation as a moral template for complex integrity

There are many psychological templates for cultivating integrity. Many approaches to integrity are either psychological, professional, or business.³⁷ There are a few books which treat integrity from a philosophical point of view.³⁸ Most, however, do not address integrity in a way that is helpful in navigating the particular complexity of the Asian American's multicultural moral world.

Cox, La Caze, and Levine do address integrity in a more nuanced way in *Integrity and the Fragile Self*.³⁹ They propose that integrity, as a virtue, is

not a kind of wholeness, solidity of character or moral purity. It involves a capacity to respond to change in one's values or circumstances, a kind of continual remaking of the self, as well as a capacity to balance competing commitments and values and to take responsibility for one's work and thought.⁴⁰

This reflection upon human experience, while recognizing the kinds of conflicts that Asian Americans might face, does not articulate a method for cultivating the capacity it suggests we need.

To cultivate an integrity that can develop moral agency and inspire moral action, I look to the notion of *reconciliation*. Complex integrity involves reconciling our different and even conflicting interpretations of our experiences, values and norms. I suggest reconciliation as a

³⁷ See, e.g., Henry Cloud, *Integrity: the Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality* (San Francisco: Harper, 2009).

³⁸ See Halfron, *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry*.

³⁹ Damian Cox, Marguerite La Caze, and Michael P. Levine, *Integrity and the Fragile Self* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

⁴⁰ Cox et al., 41.

moral approach to integrity that can provide a way to understand and negotiate the conflicting moral norms and cultural loyalties Asian Americans face.

The basic processes in reconciliation are forgiveness, repentance, justice, and renewed community. Forgiveness and repentance heal broken relationships. Repentance ceases the wrongdoing that breaches the relationship, and seeks to make amends. Forgiveness ceases the cycles of revenge and violence that keep people apart. Rather than ignoring the real harms done by those in relationship to each other, both involve moral accounting and truth telling and are thus consonant with the notion of honesty. Justice and renewed community rebuild alienated relationships. Justice is foundational to the creation of a better, more whole relationship. The processes of renewed community work to implement the just order or relationship desired. Both are consonant with the notion of wholeness, as they both seek to recreate and institute a more peaceful and just relationship between the parties.

As processes, rather than end states, these are neither linear nor consecutive, but concurrent. The different processes interweave and interact and sometimes double back on themselves, slowly moving on all fronts in the direction of wholeness and reintegration. Thus reconciliation is not static, but characterizes a relationship by ongoing practices of forgiving, repenting, seeking justice, and community.

Forgiveness

As Asian Americans seeking complex integrity, forgiveness is the determination to face the moral conflicts and wounds that we encounter. In other words, to be truly integrated, we must acknowledge the harm that has been done to us. This includes the recognition of the impact

of racism, imperialism, and oppression in our lives, and admitting our internalization of racism and imperialism, and our participation in structural racism, imperialism and oppression. For example, when Asians participate in societal discrimination against those of darker skin, we show that we have internalized racism. Or, when we try to gain access to power and privilege by distancing ourselves from other struggling groups, we participate in structural imperialism.

Honesty starts with the self. If one is dishonest with oneself, one cannot be honest with others. If one is dishonest with oneself, one cannot be whole, or integrated. Forgiveness is premised on this. Unlike the notion of condonation, which is to ignore or accept as right the wrong that has been committed, forgiveness requires complete honesty and moral accounting of the wrong, and then the openness to remaining in relationship with the wrong-doer.⁴¹

Forgiveness as a step toward integrity is the forgiveness of self, that is, complete honesty about the self and its strengths and flaws, and the acceptance of that self with its strengths and flaws. Too often we do not face the truth because are not willing to accept ourselves as we are, or because we do not want to change.

Forgiving ourselves first entails our recognition of the wrongs done to us and our complicity in internalizing those wrongs, and then acknowledging our part in perpetuating those wrongs. But forgiveness is not the end of the process of reconciliation. The corollary to forgiveness is repentance.

⁴¹ Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

Repentance

After facing one's faults, in repentance one stops committing those wrongs against the self and rectifies them if possible. In other words, to be truly integrated one must be aware of the ways one has harmed, or continues to harm others, and must also be *committed to stopping that harm*.

In our context as Asian Americans seeking complex integrity, repentance is the determination not to be co-opted into a culture that is alienated from oneself and oppressive of others, and then acting to *reverse* the different forms of direct, internalized, and structural racism. In other words, it is the commitment not to "pass" within the dominant culture in order to benefit from a system that exploits others. It is also to recognize where we have internalized racism and domination, and been prejudiced against and oppressive of others—women, children, those darker skinned than we are, those less educationally or economically advantaged—and to cease our own prejudice, denial, and oppressive actions. It involves being committed to stopping the harm we cause by our participation in structural and internalized racism and acting on it. This leads us to the next aspect of reconciliation, justice.

Justice

Justice is the structure of right relations, or the conditions under which people have the incentives to engage in right relations. It is the overarching backdrop, and goal toward which reconciliation works. True reconciliation presupposes that injustice and all the relevant concerns of justice are being addressed.

Justice as part of complex integrity is the cultivation of right relationships among one's various inner selves and between the inner and outer selves. The classic Greek notion of justice is to give each his or her due. Thus, justice within the self could be to honor appropriately the different moral claims to which we are subject. To do ourselves justice as Asian Americans is to give our various alliances and loyalties their due, by honoring appropriately the different claims, norms, and cultural values in our lives, as both Asians and Americans. Linking this to the biblical language of *shalom*, to honor appropriately the different cultural claims upon one's life is to be whole, at peace with oneself.

Determining the "appropriateness" of the different claims, however, is perhaps the most subjective part of the whole process. How do we determine what is appropriate? Karen Lebacqz points out in her narrative theory of justice that whilst we do not know what justice is, we can recognize injustice when we see it. We strive for justice by countering injustice. Justice is the story of our fight against injustice. In fighting injustice, step by step, we will find our way towards a more just future.⁴²

I suggest that thinking in terms of narrative justice is a promising way for Asian Americans to process the different cultural claims they are subject to. We do not know a theoretically "perfect" or "just" balance of cultures, and surely, that differs from one cultural mix and experience to another. But we can recognize when cultural claims are unjust. We counter those injustices as we encounter them, thus slowly progressing toward a more just future. When we recognize specific instances of oppression or injustice, either internally or in society, we resist

⁴² Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1987).

them. In other words, in an ongoing interactive process of discerning and acting, we oppose *inappropriate* cultural claims as we encounter them, and thus move toward an appropriate moral balance. For example, a person facing conflicting world views also faces conflicting claims to his or her priorities. Does an employer hire an undocumented alien, contravening the law, but also providing income and work to one in need? Narrative justice would answer the question by asking first what injustice would need to be countered, and what in fact one could do. One with complex integrity would take that answer and then consider it with the need to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Renewing community

The last step in the template of reconciliation is to renew community, to rebuild the ongoing relationship between formerly estranged parties. Within the societal narrative framework, this is to reauthor a community’s story to include narratives of all the society’s members. In the personal work toward complex integrity, this step reunites the disparate parts of ourselves back into relationship with each other. We write a narrative for the future that incorporates the various subnarratives of our life, and then we live and act into that future.

This step, renewed relationship between the various parts of ourselves, first requires that we Asian Americans accept our biculturality. We stop striving for monoculturality either by clinging unquestioningly to our identity in the old world or by acculturating equally unquestioningly into the dominant society. It may mean accepting the fact that conflict in identity, with its attendant conflict in moral norms, is a normal and inevitable response to the fractured worlds we live in.

Complex integrity thus requires moral imagination. Moral imagination is to “see simultaneously what is and what might yet be for the best, to engage at the same time the most creative of human passions, and consequently to lure into action and to sustain commitment.”⁴³ In moral imagination we imagine the moral future that we desire, and take steps toward it. It is in the steps we take toward our desired future that we weave our subnarratives together and unite the disparate parts of ourselves. The end result is moral agency—moral power—which is effective moral action flowing from moral character.

The Practice of Complex Integrity

Complex integrity as a virtue is acquired through practice. The practice of the process of complex integrity comes in two parts: reflecting on one’s life from a moral perspective, and acting as a consequence of the moral reflection.

Moral reflection and narrative

Meta-narratives by which one measures consistency and loyalty, and thus integrity, are no longer found persuasive in a globalized postmodern world that conflicts, collides, juxtaposes, and blends cultures. In the absence of persuasive meta-narratives, many turn to the personal narrative to justify their choices and to interpret their experiences in light of the various traditions that claim them. Because the personal narrative is constructed from particularities of lived experience, it is also contextual, and takes us out of the abstract into the praxis of life.

⁴³ James Mackey, *Religious Imagination* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1986), 23.

Inn Sook Lee describes a process through which Asian American women (primarily Korean) move toward integrity, or the “real self.” The steps in this process include conscientization, reflection or introspection, and integration.⁴⁴ The first stage, conscientization, happens when Asian American women become aware of the dissonances between their inner, authentic selves, and the cultural expectations of them, for example, to be submissive. I suggest that it is at this stage of conscientization, or awareness of moral and cultural inner conflict, that it becomes useful for Asian Americans to tell the narrative of their moral lives. This helps us articulate the moral dissonances and conflicts we face and determine the source of the moral conflicts.

I suspect that idea of a personal moral narrative may be particularly challenging for Asians, who are stereotypically uncomfortable with drawing attention themselves, and who are, also stereotypically, more comfortable operating in their collective or social roles. Speaking up exposes one to the risk of having our personal lives and our flaws exposed, and of being seen to be imperfect. In other words, it exposes us to shame. This shame is part of the silence which Matsuoka describes.

In the same way repentance is a morally and theologically appropriate response to guilt and/or remorse, complex integrity is a morally and theologically appropriate answer to the cultural shame that subjects some Asian Americans to lives of emotional and moral passivity and conformity. It takes courage and humility to admit subjectivity, to be vulnerable and risk shame.

⁴⁴ Inn Sook Lee, *Passage to the Real Self* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009), 163.

To undertake personal moral narrative is a moral choice that promotes courage, honesty, self-awareness, and humility.

The link between narrative and integrity has antecedents in the story of Job. The Hebrew Bible terms Job a person of integrity, because he articulated his moral dilemma and confusion. Counter to the prevailing theologies of the time that his friends articulated, he claimed to be righteous, in spite of the disasters that befell him. God did not censure him, but rather describes him as one with integrity for speaking his truth even though it meant questioning the prevailing moral norms and theological explanations of his time. Likewise, Asian Americans, in articulating their moral dilemmas due to their bi- and multi-cultural experiences and interpretations, lament the brokenness of North American globalized society rather than passively accepting the dominance and triumph of its hegemonic cultural narrative. This truth-telling is a step toward complex integrity of the self and healing for society.

Appendix 1 is a set of instructions I developed to guide one in writing a personal moral narrative, which is a first step toward constructing an imagined moral future. The moral narrative invites reflection, analysis, and imagination, and prompts one toward moral action.

Moving into the future: Agency

After the introspective work of inner reconciliation, we must look outward toward moral action. Complex integrity culminates in moral agency. Inn Sook Lee terms this integrity, the “final rite of passage in which Asian women ... embody their autonomous selves.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid., 163.

Agency is the natural outcome of integrity, and integrity fosters agency. Integrity does not only reside in the intellect, within ourselves: we must express our convictions in our actions. Our actions and moral stances must support what we believe, what we accord to ourselves. We create wholeness and integrity by acting into it, by taking steps toward the moral future that we desire. We create—or co-create—the moral path we travel on. The image of a rock climber comes to mind: the rock climber hammers a stake into the rock surface and hangs her weight from the stake for dear life—all while hammering another stake into the rock. She transfers her weight to the next stake, and does the same again and again, thus creating her way as she goes.

Thus, after we have been introspectively honest with ourselves, determined the injustices in our lives and prioritized our moral obligations, integrity mandates that we turn outward. Justice at this point requires that we do what we can for whomever we can. Christian or biblical notions of justice include loving our neighbor as ourselves and doing to others as we would have them do to us.⁴⁶ In so far as we desire justice and reconciliation for and within ourselves, we must work toward justice and reconciliation for others. Cox, et al. also link the notion of integrity with the notion of commitment, which

involves an agent's disposition to act in certain ways: a person is committed to a principle when they generally act in the light of it, even when this is difficult and uncomfortable; they are committed to a cause when they consistently act to advance it; to a project when they consistently act in pursuit of it and to a person when they consistently act in what they take to be the person's interests.⁴⁷

There is no moral dissonance to the reciprocal “golden rule,” which has parallels in Asian moral philosophies. Tu Weiming argues that the Confucian way rests on two principles: “Do not

⁴⁶ Matthew 7:9-12, 22:37-39; Mark 12:31; Luke 6:27-31.

⁴⁷ Cox et al., *Integrity and the Fragile Self*, 83.

do unto others what we would not want others to do unto us...[and] In order to establish ourselves we must help others to establish themselves.”⁴⁸ In addition, in Confucian philosophy, the heart and the mind are signified by the same word *xin*. Virtue and action integrate; moral actions build one’s character. For example, to develop *ren*, or the Confucian notion of humanity and benevolence, one desiring to promote oneself promotes others.⁴⁹ Both the notion of *junzi*, or best self, and *renren*, the person who loves sacrificially, focus on the cultivation of virtue and the love of others.⁵⁰ The completion of virtue is to help others.⁵¹

Likewise, we know what is perhaps the most quoted of Gandhi’s sayings: “Be the change.” This calls for acting (non-violently) on behalf of Truth, with which Gandhi equates justice and liberation. “Being the change” means acting in the way we want the world to become, which in turn requires the moral imagination to envision the moral future we want and the moral courage to work toward it—for our sake and for the sake of others.

Conclusion

To cultivate complex integrity as a habit or pattern of living is a way of developing moral agency, moral character that flows into moral action. Complex integrity as a virtue is ultimately a personal pattern of habits and actions that signify an honest and whole life. It is to come to

⁴⁸ Tu Weiming, “Joining East and West: A Confucian Perspective on Human Rights,” in *Harvard International Review* (1998): 44-49.

⁴⁹ May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27-29, citing Confucius’ *Analects*, 6:30

⁵⁰ K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2008) 281-82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 345-48, citing *Analects* 4:25 and 6:28.

terms with the cultural and moral dissonances that we face, prioritize between them, and to imagine a moral future that we act into.

I suggest that those with partial privilege, who live in a marginalized in-betweenness, have a responsibility to use the unique gift of wisdom gleaned from our liminal state and our partial privilege to speak out on behalf of those who are oppressed. To find the courage to do so, we imagine a moral narrative that leads us into a more just future, to live into that future by acting in solidarity with others who are oppressed. This is the moral call to Asian Americans: to work toward justice and reconciliation for all.

Moral Autobiography or Narrative of Moral Life

Section A: Write an account of your life, including the following elements:

1. *Social location*: where you grew up, your family's socio-economic status, other social and economic information, e.g. "I grew up in L.A./Kenya/London/rural Wisconsin," "I was born into an upper-middle class family/I grew up on a farm/I was a missionary's kid" etc.
2. *Moral events and decisions you have made in your life*: things that you did or happened to you that influenced you morally, e.g. poverty, divorce, moving to Africa to be a missionary, alcoholism, vows of poverty or celibacy, end of life decisions for a parent/loved one, adoption or abortion, divorce, etc.
3. *Moral location*: what was the moral culture in which you grew up in, e.g. type of church, 60's Woodstock generation, particular traditional values (Amish, Confucian), philosophical traditions (transcendentalism), etc.
4. *Moral authorities*: What have been your particular moral authorities (e.g. your particular scriptural tradition, your particular church's teachings, your particular philosophical traditions, etc.)? Have they ever conflicted, and if so, how have you navigated those conflicts?

Section B: Reflect on your life so far, including the following elements:

5. *Issues of moral character*: How has your character been shaped by the moral events in your life? E.g. "my growing up poor, or gay, or black has led me to make a struggle for justice a priority;" "my divorce has made me a more humble person;" "I continue to be torn between career and family," "seeking success is important to me," etc. What habits have you acquired as a result of your moral past?
6. *Reflection on the trajectory of your life so far*: Does there seem to be an overarching moral direction to your life, or has it been confusing and fragmented? What are the conflicts and dissonances that you experience? Where have you felt silent, or powerless, or pain? What do you think might be needed for clarity and/or integrity?

Section C: Imagining your future and getting there

7. *Imagining your moral future*: Where do you want to go in the future? What might consist of a good life for you, given your social and moral locations? What is realistic, and what is achievable? What are the barriers to your moral future, and how may they be overcome? What *can* you accomplish?
8. *Moral action to realize your moral future*: How might you get to your imagined moral future? What are some major steps you need to take? Some minor steps? What do you need before doing something? What prevents you from the "Just Do It?"