

The Metaphysics of Personhood in Confucian Role Ethics

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Abstract: Inspired by early Confucian texts such as the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*, defenders of Confucian role ethics argue that persons are constituted by their social roles and relationships. However, this has the puzzling implication that persons cannot survive changes in social roles and relationships. This paper proposes ways to understand this claim by appealing to the notions of essence, material constitution, and four-dimensionalism. In particular, it will be suggested that role ethicists should distinguish biological humans from persons and should say either that (i) persons are materially constituted by biological humans, or that (ii) persons are four-dimensional objects that merely overlap with biological humans. There has thus far not been much contact between early Chinese philosophy and contemporary metaphysics in this vein. A secondary goal of this paper is to demonstrate that views in early Chinese philosophy can be examined within frameworks from contemporary metaphysics, and furthermore, that the results include novel theses not yet recognized in contemporary metaphysics.

Keywords: metaphysics, moral personhood, Confucianism, role ethics, essence, material constitution

1. Introduction

Some scholars of early Confucian philosophy have argued in favor of a *role ethics* on which a person's social roles and relationships play a central role in ethical reasoning.¹ Role ethics is typically introduced as both an alternative to the dominant virtue ethics interpretations of early Confucianism, and as a competitor to contemporary ethical theories.² Part of the motivation is to reject what is called *individualism* in ethical thought, with its central appeal to notions like rights, freedom, and autonomy.³ Role ethicists instead

¹ See Ames (2011; 2021), Ames and Rosemont, Jr. (2011), Bockover (2012), Nuyen (2007; 2009), Ramsey (2016b; 2016a), Rosemont, Jr. (1991; 2015), and Rosemont, Jr. and Ames (2016). Role ethicists like Ames and Rosemont draw primarily on the *Analects* and *Xiaojing*. Bockover also appeals to *Mencius*, though Ramsey (2015) argues that Mencius could not have been a role ethicist.

² See Stalnaker (2020) for an overview of Confucian virtue ethics. Other defenders of a "virtue ethics" reading of early Confucianism include Angle and Slote (2013), Ivanhoe (2008), Stalnaker (2020) and van Norden (2007). Kupperman (2004) argues for yet another reading, but on his character ethics, the self is partly constituted by tradition and community—in this respect, character ethics has more in common with role ethics than virtue ethics.

³ Rosemont, Jr. (1991) rejects the notion of "autonomous, rights-bearing individuals" in favor of "role-bearing persons".

stress the fact that we are social beings that enter social relationships and occupy social roles like daughter, teacher, and friend. As Rosemont (1991, 90) writes in one of the earliest statements of this view, “for the early Confucians there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others.”

My interest in this paper is not on whether role ethics is the correct interpretation of early Confucian philosophical thought. The classical texts, according to Rosemont (1991, 92), provide only a “highly salutary beginning” to answering certain concrete ethical questions. Nor do I intend to assess whether role ethics is the correct ethical theory *tout court*. My aims will be somewhat modest, for although role ethicists have been prolific in their writings, “critical engagement with the role ethics view is still in its infancy” (Stalnaker 2020, 95).

This paper concerns the metaphysical implications of role ethics. Role ethicists make distinctively metaphysical claims about personhood—that persons are constituted by their social roles and relationships—which deserve a fuller treatment than they have been given. These metaphysical claims have not been neglected *per se* in the literature, as the goal of debates over role ethics have focused instead on its ethical, social, and political significance. However, they have interesting implications for debates in contemporary metaphysics. To this end, one of the main aims of this paper is to demonstrate to contemporary metaphysicians the relevance of views in and discussions about early Confucian philosophy.

Early Confucian philosophy is not generally considered to have much to offer to contemporary metaphysics. Concepts invoked in contemporary metaphysics, such as reality, fundamentality, and ontological dependence, are largely absent. Texts like the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi* focus instead on moral and practical questions. Furthermore, insofar as metaphysical issues do arise, they are thought to belong to a framework that is entirely alien to, and therefore separable from, contemporary metaphysics—after all, in early Confucian philosophy we find only explicit mention of cosmological notions like Heaven (天) and *dào* (道), which find no purchase in contemporary metaphysics. Nonetheless, starting with the concept of personhood give us a way to bring early Confucian philosophy into conversation with contemporary metaphysics.⁴ Some discussions of personhood in contemporary metaphysics, with their narrow focus on criteria of identity over time, have limitations that the role ethics context can help broaden.

Furthermore, I will argue that there are frameworks in contemporary metaphysics—especially in recent literature—that can provide a metaphysical background for claims about personhood in role ethics. Some defenders of role ethics may disapprove

⁴ See Connolly (2019), who both acknowledges the lack of metaphysical theorizing in early Confucian ethics and highlights the importance of the metaphysics of personhood.

of the suggestion that contemporary metaphysics can have anything to offer them. On the extreme end, Rosemont (2015, 1–3) rejects the futility of detailed investigations into the foundations of a topic. And while Ames (1984) does not go this far, he argues that a “process ontology” is more appropriate to classical Chinese thought than a Western “substance ontology”.⁵ For these philosophers, the discussions in this paper will be non-starters.⁶ But other role ethicists may be more open to this project. For instance, Nuyen (2007; 2012) has argued that role ethics shares similarities with ethical positions in Western philosophy, in particular, views advanced by Taylor (1989), Emmet (1966), Smiley (1992), and May (1992). Other role ethicists appeal to notions that also appear in contemporary metaphysics, as in Bockover’s (2012, 183) characterization of personhood as interdependent, or Ramsey’s (2016a, 239) suggestion that for Mencius and Xunzi, we are biological entities constituted by social roles.

This paper is ultimately aimed at those interested in exploring connections between Confucian role ethics and contemporary metaphysics from either direction. But I do not claim to exhaust all potential connections, especially those metaphysical theses that have already been explored in traditions such as feminist care ethics and Neo-Confucianism.⁷ I also take a broad view of what “contemporary metaphysics” encompasses; I am not interested in drawing precise lines between different starting points, methodologies, or general orientations.

In section 2, I introduce the claim that persons are constituted by their social roles and relationships in the early Confucian context. This leads naturally to discussion in section 3 of the question of how to understand *constitution* and *personhood*, and some *prima facie* puzzling metaphysical implications of the role ethicist’s claims about personhood. In section 4, I show how the distinction between different kinds of essence can be used to interpret the role ethicist’s claims. This involves appealing to the idea of material constitution in contemporary metaphysics. The early Confucian context, in turn, motivates novel positions for the contemporary metaphysician. Another option for understanding the metaphysical implications of role ethics involves appealing to four-dimensionalism, as discussed in section 5; this again yields novel positions in contemporary metaphysics. Section 6 suggests further connections to views in the metaphysics of gender and other areas of metaphysics.

⁵ Though not a role ethicist, Perkins (2015) has argued for process metaphysics over substance metaphysics in early Chinese philosophy.

⁶ Ames and Rosemont (2011, 17) reject fitting “the early Confucian vision of the moral life” into the “mold of Western philosophical discourse”.

⁷ Though a critic of role ethics, Ivanhoe (2017) defends the relationality of personhood. Many of the articles in Ivanhoe et al (2018) are also pertinent.

2. Personhood, Normativity, and Ritual

Defenders of role ethics generally endorse the following claims:

- Constitutive** Persons are constituted by their social roles and relationships.⁸
Source Social roles and relationships are the source of ethical normativity.⁹

Constitutive is a metaphysical claim about the nature of personhood, which says that persons are constituted by the particular social roles that they occupy and the particular social relationships that they stand in. The term *personhood* can have multiple meanings, but like many contemporary ethicists, role ethicists seem to have in mind something like a moral agent. For instance, Nuyen (2007, 319) writes:

We have seen that in Confucian ethics, the moral rules concerning duties and obligations and the moral virtues are all derived from the roles that define an individual as person or agent ... As we have seen, to be moral is what it means to be someone in the Confucian context.

Source draws a direct connection between, on the one hand, the social roles one occupies and the social relationships one stands in, and on the other hand, the ethical norms that govern one's behavior. **Source** arguably makes sense given **Constitutive**: if persons are constituted by their social roles and relationships, then the norms that govern their behavior are those "encoded" in their roles and relationships as obligations derived from social expectations—in this case, which are set out in ritual (*li* 禮).¹⁰ Actions that accord with ritual are then considered *yì* (義 morally appropriate, righteous).¹¹ Denying **Source** would allow for some non-role-based source of ethical normativity, thereby diluting the importance of roles in ethical reasoning. For instance, defenders of Confucian

⁸ **Constitutive** is ambiguous between two interpretations, which Ramsey (2016a) calls "strong" and "moderate". The strong interpretation of **Constitutive** is that persons are "no more, or nothing above, the nexus of their roles", whereas on the moderate interpretation, persons are only partially constituted by their social roles and relationships. The moderate interpretation allows for something else to partially constitute persons, such as virtuous dispositions or other intrinsic qualities of individuals. Ramsey (2016a) counts himself and Nuyen as moderate role ethicists. Stalnaker (2020) and Wong (2004) endorse the moderate interpretation of **Constitutive**, but are not role ethicists because they reject **Source**.

⁹ Note that in the classical Chinese context, Heaven (*tiān* 天) is the ultimate source of ethical normativity.

¹⁰ Nuyen (2007, 317) writes, "To each role is attached a set of obligations, and to be in a role is to be under a set of obligations. Which obligations go with which role is determined by more or less explicit social expectations. For the key social roles, it is encoded in the rites, *li*."

¹¹ Nuyen (2007, 317–18) points to *Analects* 4.10, *Analects* 15.17, and *Xunzi* chapter 27.

virtue ethics acknowledge the importance of social roles in early Confucianism but locate the source of ethical normativity in virtuous dispositions.¹²

A person's role in the family is especially important:

"It is family reverence (*xiao*)," said the Master, "that is the root of excellence, and whence education (*jiao*) itself is born. Sit down again and I will explain it to you."¹³

The Master said, "When someone's father is still alive, observe his intentions; after his father passed away, observe his conduct. If for three years he does not alter the ways of his father, he may be called a filial son."¹⁴

Other norms for sons include not causing one's parents undue worry (*Analects* 2.6), ultimately deferring to them (4.18), and covering up for their fathers' wrongdoing (13.18). Role ethicists sometimes start with the so-called "five relationships" (*wǔlún* 五倫) in *Mencius* 3A4: father-child, ruler-minister, husband-wife, older sibling-younger sibling, and friend-friend; they then extend rolehood to other important relationships such as teacher-student.¹⁵

Ritual includes not just ceremonial rituals but rules of conduct more generally. Consider *Analects* 10.2:

At court, when speaking with officers of lower rank, [the Master] was pleasant and affable; when speaking with officers of upper rank, he was former and proper. When his lord was present, he combined an attitude of cautious respect with graceful ease.¹⁶

This passage also shows that Confucius thought that different conduct is appropriate depending on circumstances, including with whom one is interacting.

Constitutive entails the following weaker claim:

Necessary Persons necessarily occupy social roles and stand in social relationships.

¹² See for instance Ivanhoe (2022), who argues that "[i]t is this collection of virtuous dispositions or human excellences that constitute what is good in each case and that have fundamental explanatory power within Confucian ethics".

¹³ From Ames and Rosemont's (2009) translation of the *Xiàojīng* (孝經).

¹⁴ This translation of *Analects* 1.11 is from Slingerland (2006, 5); it is partly repeated in *Analects* 4.20.

¹⁵ See for instance Bockover (2012, 185). And Ramsey (2015, 202 fn.5) writes, "If Confucianism is to be applicable to modernity, it must recognize a much more extensive range of roles."

¹⁶ From Slingerland (2015, 203 fn.5); see also 10.25.

While it is clear that Ames intends the stronger thesis, he often contrasts “constitutive” with “contingent” (Ames 2011, 124). If the worry for the role ethicist is about the contingency of social roles, then **Necessary** ought to suffice. Doing so brings more views into the fold. Though not a role ethicist, McLeod (2012a, 439) endorses something like **Necessary** when he writes:

I coin the term ‘moral personhood’ to describe the concept found in the *Analects* of the developed social entity whose integration (in the right way) into a community imparts on them agency, as linked to a larger communal agent, and whose moral responsibility, action, and identity are linked to the community into which they are integrated.¹⁷

This position is easier to defend than **Constitutive**, given the Confucian emphasis on community as necessary for virtue (*dé* 德) or Goodness (*rén* 仁):

Analects 4.1: The Master said, “To live in the neighborhood of the Good is fine. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are Good, how will one obtain wisdom?”

Analects 4.25: The Master said, “Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors.”¹⁸

And in Book 5 of the *Xunzi*:

That by which people are people, what is it? It’s that they have distinctions. . . .Animals have fathers and sons but not the love between fathers and sons; they have males and

¹⁷ In fact, McLeod explicitly argues that a condition of moral personhood is being a member of some community; see McLeod (2012a, 440).

¹⁸ Both passages are cited by McLeod (2012a; 2012b) as key evidence. These translations are from Slingerland (2003). McLeod also points to *Analects* 4.7, noting that he thinks it is often “misread”. Compare Slingerland’s translation with McLeod’s:

The Master said, “People are true to type with regard to what sort of mistakes they make. Observe closely the sort of mistakes a person makes—then you will know his character.” (Slingerland 2006, 31)

The master said, “the mistakes of people (*ren* 人) are in each case (*ge* 各) attributable (*yu* 於) to their group (*dang* 黨). Observe their mistakes, and you will know whether humanity (*ren* 仁) obtains. (McLeod 2012b, 510)

The latter asserts a connection between one’s group and whether one is *rén* (Good), leaving room to debate the nature of that connection.

females but not the differences between men and women; so among the *dào* of people, none do not have distinctions. Among distinctions, none are greater than role-divisions (*fèn*); among role-divisions, none are greater than ritual propriety; among forms of ritual propriety, none are greater than the sage-kings.¹⁹

Note that there are weak and strong ways to interpret **Necessary**. On the weak interpretation, **Necessary** claims only that persons necessarily occupy *some-or-other* social roles and stand in *some-or-other* social relationships. This claim is still substantive, for it rules out the personhood of social recluses: those who have severed all connections to social communities.²⁰ But an even stronger claim is that persons necessarily occupy the particular social roles and stand in the particular social relationships that they in fact do. The strong interpretation of **Necessary** aligns more with the role ethicist's view of the significance of one's particular social roles and relationships. One sympathetic to role ethics has the option of endorsing the strong or weak interpretations of **Necessary** instead of **Constitutive**.

Note also that there is a gap between **Constitutive** (and the strong version of **Necessary**) and the claim that community is necessary for developing virtues—only the latter seems to be supported by the passages from the *Analects* cited above. This gap can be closed by considering another claim defended by role ethicists: that personhood is developed over a lifetime. Ramsey (2016a, 236) calls this the *achievement thesis*: “full personhood is an achievement of *ren*”. For instance, Bockover (2012, 188) talks of others becoming part of the self, and Ames (2012, 644–45) writes, “while all our roles are in degree constitutive of who we become, we certainly do invest more heavily in some of these roles than we do in others, and these more invested roles are most formative in shaping our always unique persons”. This suggests a model of personhood unlike what we find in most contemporary metaphysics. It may be that the achievement thesis is better accommodated by frameworks that advocate a narrative conception of the self.²¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will set this idea aside, though I hope to explore it in future work.

3. Metaphysical Puzzles

¹⁹ Thanks to Chris Fraser for pointing out this passage (translation his). This is sometimes called the “ladder of souls” passage.

²⁰ While the early Confucians did not talk about social recluses in this extreme sense, they did talk about hermits who withdrew from public office (see *Analects* 18).

²¹ This is in fact what Ames (2021) explicitly endorses; I find his claims reminiscent of Schectman (1996; 2014).

My primary focus in this paper will be on **Constitutive** rather than **Source**.²² But it is unclear how we should understand **Constitutive**—how can a person be constituted by a *role*, even a particular role, given that roles are not concrete particulars? Presumably, persons are not constituted by roles in the same sense that they are constituted by hands, feet, organs, etc. Furthermore, there is a puzzling implication of **Constitutive** given the fact that our social roles and relationships change. Consider Rosemont (2015, 94):

Being thus the aggregate sum of the roles I live, it must follow that as I grow older my roles will change, and consequently I will become quite literally a different person. Marriage changed me, as did becoming a father, and later, a grandfather. I interacted differently with my daughters when they were children than when teen-agers, and differently gain now that they are adult mothers themselves. Divorce or becoming a widower would change me yet again. In all of this I not only change, others with whom I relate perceive me in changed ways as well. And of course, they, too, are always changing as we change each other.

It is uncontroversial that one becomes different in the *qualitative* sense any time one undergoes change of this kind. Some qualitative changes are more significant than others: becoming a caretaker for an aging parent comes with financial, social, and moral obligations that are more momentous than cat-sitting for a friend for an afternoon. However, the question here concerns *numerical* identity rather than qualitative change or changes in self-conception.²³ If one becomes numerically a different person when their social roles and relationships change, then the former person ceases to exist and another person comes into existence. As Rosemont acknowledges, our social roles and relationships change all of the time. What we might have thought was one person over a lifetime is really a series of persons.

This is not merely a curious result. Suppose there is a person, Ray, who at some time t_1 is married to Anna. They divorce amicably. Ray then remarries Brian at t_2 . If persons cannot survive changes in social roles and relationships, then Ray at t_1 (“Ray₁”) is a different person from Ray at t_2 (“Ray₂”), for although Ray₁ and Ray₂ both occupy the social role *spouse*, they are espoused to different people. If at t_1 , Ray₁ cared for Anna while she was sick, then they are to be commended for doing so. But should we also commend Ray₂ at t_2 for Ray₁’s actions? Sometimes we do think one person should be commended for the actions of another, as when we commend a teacher for their students’ learning. However, in

²² Accepting **Source** leads to other questions, such as what to do when the norms associated with one’s various roles are in tension; see Ramsey (2015) for discussion specific to Confucian role ethics.

²³ See Noonan and Curtis (2022) for an overview of philosophical issues concerning numerical identity.

these cases, the person themselves has a commendable characteristic, e.g. the teacher's ability to teach well. **Constitutive** thus seems to lead to difficulties in appropriate moral attitudes towards numerically distinct persons.²⁴

Perhaps only a subset of one's roles and relationships are constitutive, so that one can survive "minor" social changes. We may include the important social roles and relationships, e.g. familial ties, and exclude the pleasantries exchanged with a checkout cashier. This is how Ames (2012, 644) in fact responds to Bell (2012, 606) when Bell objects that some social relationships are more contingent than others. But Ramsey (2016a, 237–38) points out that the line between these will be difficult to draw. Ramsey's own solution is to say that the "five relationships" (*wǔlún* 五倫) are the constitutive relationships, for "[w]ith the exception of the ruler-subject roles, these roles involve family and intimacy and are long-term." Of course, the role ethicist does not need to draw the line around exactly these roles just because they were the ones privileged by early Confucians.²⁵ For our purposes, it does not matter—no matter which relationships we privilege, we will still get the puzzling result that there exist a series of person where there should only be one.

The question of how to understand this puzzling aspect of **Constitutive** will be central in framing the discussion in sections 4 and 5. However, the intention is not to argue that the metaphysical views discussed can be found explicitly either in the classical texts or in the writings of role ethicists. Rather, they are reconstructions of the metaphysical frameworks one might adopt when considering the claims and attitudes about personhood made in both literatures (especially the latter). This project is thus offered in the same spirit as Sarkissian (2018, 306–7), who writes of oneness: "I find this particular sense of oneness in classical Confucian conceptions of society, though without the explicit (and robust) metaphysics of the later neo-Confucians. Though this sense of oneness is not stated in explicit terms, it is nonetheless one that can be easily reconstructed out of certain views of individuals and collectives in classical Confucian texts."

4. Essence and Material Constitution

In what follows, I focus on the puzzle of change for personhood. As noted in the passage in section 3, Rosemont (2015, 94) thinks that "as I grow older my roles will change, and consequently I will become quite literally a different person". He then continues (2015, 95):

²⁴ The connection between identity and moral responsibility, and its issues, is well-recognized; see Shoemaker (2021) for an overview.

²⁵ Hsü (1970) argues that the idea of the five relationships was elevated by later Han scholars, so many not even be the ones privileged by the early Confucians themselves.

[D]escribing our interpersonal behavior from this perspective goes strongly against the grain of the *essential* self that we have been encultured to think and feel we *really* are, something that remains constant and unchanging throughout the vicissitudes of our lives...

On the Confucian account, seeking that essential self must be like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, for we are basically *constituted* by the roles we live in the midst of others. Even the tone of our voice tends to change when speaking to our parents and then to a friend ... each of us has a unique, but always changing identity.

This suggests that the complaint isn't about whether or not we survive changes in our social roles and relationships. Rather, it's about the existence of an "essential self", one whose identity is independent of their social roles and relationships. I will argue that defenders of **Constitutive** can keep this intuition by acknowledging a distinction between essences of kinds and essences of individuals, and will show how the role ethicist can in fact accept both. (Note that I use the term *individual* in the way it is typically used in contemporary metaphysics—that is, not as a synonym for *person*, but something more like *object* or *thing*. In contrast, in the role ethics literature, *individual* is sometimes used as a foil for the role ethicist view that personhood involves social roles and relationships. For instance, Ames and Rosemont (2011, 19) write, "It is important to note that, while the general terms denoting familial and other roles might be said to be abstract, they are just barely so, unlike the key terms in Western ethics, beginning with *individual*—the locus of moral analysis in Western ethical theorizing.")

There has been a fair amount of discussion of essence in contemporary metaphysics. However, it is not always clear what is meant by terms like *essence*. Sometimes, people are talking about *essential properties*: properties that an individual must have to be that thing. This can be understood modal-existentially, so that necessarily, an individual must have its essential properties to exist. Alternatively, it can be understood as a claim about the nature of a thing. Not every property an individual must have in order to exist is part of its nature, if one accepts the existence of properties like *being such that 2+2=4*. Thus, some require that essential properties "make the individual what it is" or "belong to its real definition". If we also say that such properties "suffice" for picking out that individual, we have the notion of the essence of an individual: the collection of properties that are jointly essential to and sufficient for being that individual. We can call this its *individual essence*.²⁶

In addition to individual essences, we can talk about *kind essences*: the collection of properties that are jointly essential and sufficient for belonging to a kind. For instance, one

²⁶ See Roca-Royes (2011) for an overview.

might think that to be a methane molecule is to be a chemical compound composed of carbon atom bonded to four hydrogen atoms. All and only methane molecules have this structure, and necessarily so. A methane molecule will also have as an essential property *having a carbon atom* as a part. But since this property does not distinguish methane from glucose or carbon dioxide, it does not comprise the essence of the kind *methane*.

The existence of essences of persons is compatible with **Constitutive**, and with both strong and weak interpretations of **Necessary**. The weak interpretation of **Necessary** can be seen as a partial characterization of the kind *person*: social roles and relationships are necessary for personhood.²⁷ **Constitutive** and the strong interpretation of **Necessary** can be seen as accounts of what is essential to being a particular person (a question not settled by an account of the kind *person*). Although only **Constitutive** appeals to the notion of constitution, both posit a non-contingent connection between a particular person and their particular social roles and relationships. We can now say of Ray: Ray₁ is a spouse and Ray₂ is a spouse, but they are not the same spouse, and hence not the same person.

One may worry that this picture does not account for everything we care about in survival, e.g. the special concern we have for our own futures. What's most pressing here is that *someone* be held morally responsible for the actions of the person that ceases to exist. After all, it is a commonplace that identity is necessary for moral responsibility (see Book II, Chapter XXVII of Locke's *Essay*). If Ray₁ cared for Anna, and Ray₂ is not Ray₁, then it seems that Ray₂ cannot be morally commended for caring for Anna. Nor can Ray₂ be morally condemned for neglecting Anna, if Ray₁ had neglected Anna.

However, the considerations about personhood leave open that there is *someone* who persists from t_1 to t_2 . It is relatively common to distinguish persons from biological humans. The conditions under which an individual is a biological human—and continues to be the same biological human—need not involve any social roles and relationships. In the classical Chinese context, this could be tied to the physical body (*tǐ* 體), though the issue is complicated. There is debate about the role of the heart (*xīn* 心), which on the one hand is a physical organ, and on the other hand is the seat of cognition.²⁸ It may be that the heart of a human is distinctive of animals and is connected to personhood in addition to or instead of

²⁷ There is a relevant nearby debate concerning whether social kinds, especially gender kinds such as *woman* and *man*, have essences. Historically, feminist philosophers have been skeptical that there are essential properties of womanhood. But Mason (2016) has pointed out that this is because of concerns about such properties being biological or intrinsic; essences of social kinds like womanhood can be relational instead. In the context of role ethics, the essence of personhood is very much relational.

²⁸ For discussion, see Geaney (2002) and Slingerland (2019). *Xīn* is sometimes translated “heart-mind” to capture its significance beyond mere bodily functions.

a biological kind.²⁹ But even if persons cannot exist independently of human bodies, being a person and being a biological human are distinct *kinds*: an individual who becomes a social recluse—in the sense described in section 2—ceases to be a person, but does not cease to exist.³⁰

Equipped with this distinction, one may say that in our example, there is a biological human (“Bio-Ray”) that exists at t_1 and t_2 , even though Ray_1 only exists at t_1 and Ray_2 only exists at t_2 .³¹ The remaining task is to explain the relationship between Bio-Ray and Ray_1 and Ray_2 such that someone at t_2 can be morally commended or condemned for the actions of someone else at t_1 . Here, we can appeal to discussion surrounding the metaphysical puzzle of the statue and the lump of clay.³² Suppose that at 8am, Charlie begins work on a lump of clay. By noon, he has shaped the clay into a statue. But then at 4pm, in a fit of rage, he smashes the statue back into a formless lump. The puzzle arises because the statue and the lump of clay have different persistence conditions: the clay can survive smushing, but the statue cannot. Yet the object at noon is both a statue and a lump of clay.

One solution to this puzzle is to say that there are two material objects—at noon, there exists both a statue and a lump of clay, which happen to share all of the same material parts. (At 8am and 4pm, only the lump of clay exists.) This allows there to be one object at noon that can survive smushing, and another object that cannot. To explain how they could share all the same material parts, some say that the relationship between the lump of clay and the statue is rather intimate: the lump of clay *constitutes* the statue. Constitution is a relation of *ontological dependence*; the statue is not identical to the lump of clay, but “consists in” or “depends upon” the lump of clay.³³

I suspect that this notion of constitution—*material constitution*—is not the same as the one in play in **Constitutive**. Many paradigm cases of material constitution involve a relation between something like matter and form in the Aristotelian sense. This is also why

²⁹ Bloom (1994) argues that for Mencius, “human nature” is the best translation of *xìng* (性), and *xìng* is fundamentally biological.

³⁰ Role ethicists will differ in how willing they are to accept this distinction. Ames (1984) would presumably reject it, but as noted in the introduction, he rejects many of the presuppositions of this paper. On the other hand, Nuyen (2007, 327) seems to acknowledge the distinction. Ivanhoe (2008) suggests that **Constitutive** may be motivated by Fingarette’s (1972) claim that the early Chinese did not think that persons have “inner lives”. Slingerland (2019, 127–38) for a rejection of Fingarette’s claim, as well as Stalnaker (2020, 102–3).

³¹ Wong (2004, 420) suggests this reading on behalf of the role ethicist: “A way out of these difficulties is to take the one who stands in all the self’s relationships as a biological organism. We begin life embodied as biological organisms and become persons by entering into relationships with others of our kind.” But Wong then points out that only **Necessary** is required for this reading.

³² See Wiggins (1968) for an early discussion of this puzzle in 20th century, and Paul (2010) for an overview.

³³ For a defense of this view, see especially chapter 2 of Baker (2000). See See Wasserman (2004) for a critical examination of the notion of material constitution.

material constitution is thought to be a contingent relation, for the very same statue could have been material constitution by a different lump of clay. But as noted above, **Constitutive** is contrasted with the claim that persons are only contingently related to their social roles and relationships. Furthermore, persons do not seem to be the sorts of things that can be materially constituted by roles and relationships.

Returning to Ray, we may now say that the biological human that persists through both marriages, Bio-Ray, materially constitutes two different persons: first Ray₁, then Ray₂. In fact, Bio-Ray materially constitutes a plethora of persons in succession. This is a way to understand the claim that persons do not survive changes in their roles and relationships, while preserving the intuition that *someone* survives these changes who materially constitutes persons.

So who is to be commended for caring for Anna at t_2 , Bio-Ray or Ray₂? Although Bio-Ray does not stand in social roles and relationships, they are intimately connected to those who do in virtue of the material constitution relation. This may be enough. For Baker, constitution is a “genuine unity relation” rather than “mere spatial coincidence”. Both the person and the biological human have properties derivatively: Ray₁ has a certain height derivatively in virtue of Bio-Ray’s having that height non-derivatively, and Bio-Ray has obligations to care for others based on Ray₁’s obligations to care for others. This option makes biological humans, in addition to (or instead of) persons, the subjects of praise and blame. This is arguably not a great option for the role ethicist, for it sounds like a “self” that exists independently of one’s social roles and relationships. The role ethicist can accept the existence of a biological human that persists without thinking that this individual is the subject of our moral attitudes. But if we *do* think that this individual is the subject of our moral attitudes—even derivatively—then they seem like moral agents, as persons are.

The other option is to say that Ray₂, though a different person from Ray₁, is responsible for Ray₁’s actions in virtue of being materially constituted by an individual that materially constitutes Ray₁. We can extend Baker’s idea of derivative properties so that divorced Ray has even-more-derivative properties in virtue of being constituted by an organism that formerly constituted Ray the first spouse. One may worry, however, that this connection is not intimate enough to attribute moral responsibility to Ray₂. Furthermore, some may not like the idea of material constitution, or of there being two objects that share all of the same material parts at one time.

5. Four-Dimensionalism

Fortunately, there is another solution to the puzzle of the statue and the lump of clay: four-dimensionalism about ordinary objects.³⁴ We typically recognize that material objects have spatial parts, e.g. the statue's tail or ears or whiskers. The four-dimensionalist thinks that they have temporal parts as well: the part of the statue that exists from noon to three minutes later, the part of the statue's ear that exists from noon to three minutes later, etc. According to four-dimensionalism, neither the statue nor the lump of clay is wholly present at noon (as they would be if they were three-dimensional objects). However, they share a *temporal part* at noon—indeed, each has a plethora of three- and four-dimensional temporal parts spanning different regions of spacetime, some of which they share.³⁵ The relation of mereological overlap, that is, the sharing of parts, is distinct from the material constitution relation.

We can say that in Ray's case, Bio-Ray is a four-dimensional biological human that overlaps with a four-dimensional spouse (Ray₁) at some times and with a different four-dimensional spouse (Ray₂) at other times. In fact, Bio-Ray will overlap with many more persons: every time there is a change of social roles and relationships, the old person goes out of existence, and a new person comes into existence. As such, this view faces some of the same problems of moral responsibility that arise for the material constitution view. And it may be overall worse off. Ray₂ merely overlaps with a biological human that also overlaps Ray₂—it would be a stretch to say that Ray₂ is thereby commendable for caring for Anna, since Ray₂ neither cared for Anna nor stands in a sufficiently intimate relationship with someone that cared for Anna.³⁶

However, there is a new option available to the four-dimensionalist. We have thus far been considering views on which persons do not survive changes in social roles or relationships. But we can distinguish the view that persons cannot survive change in roles and relationships *over time* from the view that they could not have had different roles and relationships than the ones they do. **Constitutive** and **Necessary** only commit us to the latter. That is, it is only necessary for persons to occupy the social roles and stand in the social relationships that they do *over their lifetimes*.

This interpretation, though it goes against the letter of some role ethicist claims—e.g. Rosemont's (2015, 94) statement that he becomes literally a different person when his roles change—meshes better with other role ethicist claims—e.g. that personhood is developed over a lifetime. It also meshes better with the classical texts, which do not to my

³⁴ There are other views in the metaphysics of persistence literature, e.g. animalism, but I think they are less apt for role ethics.

³⁵ See Lewis (2020; 1984) or Sider (2001) for more on four-dimensionalism.

³⁶ Someone who likes the four-dimensionalist's ontology but thinks persons are three-dimensional objects could explore stage theory, as defended by Hawley (2001) and Sider (2001).

knowledge explicitly say that a person cannot survive a change or loss of social roles and relationships. After all, for Confucius, learning takes place over a lifetime:

Analects 2.4: The Master said, “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.”³⁷

Four-dimensionalism gives us a metaphysical framework for understanding this claim.³⁸ There is a four-dimensional person (Ray) that exists at t_1 and t_2 , of which Ray_1 and Ray_2 are each temporal parts. This person mereologically overlaps with a biological human (Bio-Ray)—in fact, depending on one’s other commitments, they may entirely overlap.³⁹ This results in a view in which biological humans are *modally robust* while persons are *modally fragile*. Bio-Ray could have led a different life. They could have been born a few years earlier, or died a few years later, or could have spent most of their life in Asia instead of North America. This is what I mean when I say that biological humans are modally robust. On the other hand, there are limits to how different Ray’s life could have been. It could only have been different in actions, thoughts, and other happenings that preserved Ray’s actual social roles and relationships. Thus, Ray must have been born to the same parents, with the same siblings, and have met the same friends, partnered with the same people, etc. In possible worlds talk, Bio-Ray exists according to a great many possible worlds, while Ray exists only in those worlds “socially close” to the actual world. Of course, in worlds according to which Bio-Ray exists but Ray does not, some other person exists instead.⁴⁰

This view is counterintuitive in many ways. We intuitively think that Ray could have never married Brian. But on this view, this means only that Bio-Ray could have overlapped with a different person that never re-married. This person would not have been married to Anna, for Anna likewise could not have occupied different social roles or stood in different

³⁷ This translation is from Slingerland (2003).

³⁸ There are three-dimensionalist views that seem to do so as well; thanks to Ned Markosian for pointing me to his paper (Markosian 2010).

³⁹ Hudson (1999) argues that on four-dimensionalism, persons are not living human organisms, appealing to intuitions about temporal parthood. Thanks to Bruno Guindon for reminding me of this paper.

⁴⁰ Note that I don’t think that the view that there are four-dimensional individuals is actually in conflict with the view that persons are materially constituted by biological humans. It could be that four-dimensional biological humans materially constitute persons. But since biological humans can fail to be persons (and arguably, vice versa) at times, we have to allow for the possibility that there are multiple four-dimensional biological humans that overlap where we might previously have thought there was one.

social relationships. But recall that the role ethicist thinks that one's social roles and relationships are not just significant but necessary for being the person that one is.

6. Implications for Contemporary Metaphysics

I have examined a central metaphysical claim made by defenders of role ethics and discussed its implications. I have drawn from contemporary discussions of essence, material constitution, and mereology to suggest metaphysical implications for role ethics. This yields interesting results, including views that to my knowledge have not been explored in contemporary metaphysics. First, there is the view that a single biological human materially constitutes a series of persons over its lifetime, where those persons must stand in the very same social roles and relationships in order to continue to exist. Second, there is the view that persons are modally fragile four-dimensional individuals that overlap with modally robust four-dimensional biological humans. These options should be acknowledged by contemporary metaphysicians—after all, Nuyen (2007) argues that there are views in Western philosophy that resemble role ethics, for which these options can provide a metaphysical framework.

There are more direct connections to work in contemporary metaphysics as well. For instance, consider Witt's (2011) views in the metaphysics of gender. According to Witt, we should distinguish persons, biological humans, and social individuals on the grounds that they have different persistence and identity conditions. Persons are individuals that have the first-person perspective—which according to Witt is (2011, 54) “the ability to think of oneself as oneself”—and that have autonomy—which is “a kind of inner self-legislation or self-conscious regulation of our desires, decisions, and actions”.⁴¹ Human organisms are members of the human species, that is, they realize the human genotype. And social individuals are “social position occupiers” as in, doctor, parent, immigrant. They stand in social relations essentially and are capable of intentional behavior.

On Witt's view, the biological human constitutes both the social individual and the person. In this respect, it is a variant on the view suggested in section 4. But more interesting possibilities arise once we add the idea of social individuals. For one thing, we get a new motivation for thinking that we should be considering social roles and relationships over a lifetime. Consider Charlie, who plays many social roles: he is a son, a daycare student, a truck enthusiast, and a gardener. Even granting that social individuals are distinct from human organisms and persons, why think that Charlie is one social individual rather than many? Witt argues that these social positions are unified in virtue of the normative priority of one of the social positions over the others: gender, that is, being a

⁴¹ Witt also holds that persons are the loci of rights and responsibilities. To the extent that they reject ethical notions like rights, role ethicists will reject this characterization of personhood.

man or a woman, or in Charlie's case, a boy.⁴² If Witt is right, then it doesn't make sense to think of Charlie's social roles in isolation—he has a lifelong social role in virtue of his gender, motivating the four-dimensional viewpoint.

But considerations from role ethics also put pressure on Witt's view. According to Witt, persons, human organisms, and social individuals are governed by different kinds of normativity in virtue of the kinds of thing that they are. Social individuals are governed by *social* normativity, which, Witt (2011, 19) says, "requires the recognition by others that an agent is both responsive to and evaluable under a social norm." But if the role ethicist is right, then social normativity and ethical normativity have the same source (as captured in **Source**). The role ethicist may take on some of Witt's views, but deny that persons are distinct from social individuals. Other feminist metaphysicians have commented on various aspects of Witt's views, but role ethicists can also contribute to this discussion, and potentially many others.⁴³

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⁴² There is much more to be said here, such as what it means for gender to have normative priority over other social roles. Witt provides much more detail in her book; however, here is a brief explanation using our example of Charlie.

Gender has normative priority over other social roles in the sense that its normative requirements override those of other roles. For instance, the norms governing Charlie's role as a truck enthusiast are different than the norms governing a girl's role as a truck enthusiast. It is because he is a boy that his truck enthusiasm is judged in one way—a generally positive light—rather than another—a potentially negative light. Not only do others judge Charlie in a particular way *qua* boy in all of his social roles, he himself may be aware of these norms and adjust his behavior according. Gender also defines and organizes the other roles. It is thought to be more important or appropriate that Charlie perform his role as a truck enthusiast than as a gardener, no matter how much he himself may value these roles. And again, he may be aware of this norm and may accordingly adjust his preferences. Witt does not take it as a given that gender has normative priority over other social roles; she argues that it does on the grounds that unlike other social roles, one's gender is lifelong and central to an individual's social life.

⁴³ See for instance the commentaries on Witt's book by Cudd (2012), Mikkola (2012), and Ásta (2012), along with Witt's (2012) reply.

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