Wesleyan University

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Piecemeal Progress

Stephen C. Angle, Wesleyan University

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What relevance do alternative moral traditions, such as early Chinese ethical thinking, have for people in the contemporary world? For example, suppose that we can find in early Confucian ethics particular values that are distinctively different from Western notions. How important would such a finding be today? According to three influential accounts of comparative ethics, the presence (or absence) of any given concept is not, on its own, of much significance. Chad Hansen, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Thomas Metzger all emphasize the importance of holistic units of analysis like “traditions” and “discourses” rather than focusing on individual ideas; all would suggest that trying to form any normative conclusions based on apparent facts about a single word or concept is likely to be highly misleading. In many ways they are correct; the initial section of this essay focuses on the positive things we learn from their holistic emphases. One lesson of this analysis is the importance of a critical spirit to the flourishing of a tradition. The second section therefore addresses the long-standing idea that the expression of Confucian ethical truths is governed by a quasi-genealogical transmission, or dàotǒng 道統, since the dàotǒng idea is often taken to fit poorly with genuine critical rationality. I argue to the contrary, showing that the function of dàotǒng in modern Confucianism does not undermine its status as a vital and developing tradition. Finally, in the essay’s last section I show that despite the value of the holistic approaches canvassed in the first section, each risks significantly misconstruing the nature of cross-tradition philosophical learning. Contemporary reflection on a tradition like early Confucianism can be critical to fruitful philosophical creativity, but the resulting
philosophical practice, which I call rooted global philosophy, depends on piecemeal progress, not on wholesale judgments of the superiority of one tradition to another.

Traditions and Discourses

In an essay called “The Normative Impact of Comparative Ethics,” Chad Hansen explores the relevance that alternative moral traditions have to moral debate today. Distinguishing “comparative ethics” from anthropology or history, Hansen suggests that “philosophers evaluate the motivation or warrant of different normative positions against the background of the entire philosophical and conceptual system” (Hansen 2004, 73). Unlike “first-order” moral discourse — when people within a moral community debate moral questions in accord with their shared norms of reasoning — comparative ethics operates at the level of the broad moral tradition: its role is “the rather ‘academic’ one of exhibiting and illuminating the rich complexity and coherence of the background assumptions, concepts, and norms of reflection” (ibid., 82). Comparative ethics, thus understood, can contribute to normative debates today, but only in an indirect way. When our comparative inquiries lead us to see a given alternative tradition as internally robust in certain ways, we should then accord it “moral tradition respect.”

Moral tradition respect accrues to an alternative tradition when we come to see that adherents of a tradition pay serious attention to objections and to rival positions — and especially if they provide “sound responses” to these objections (ibid., 92). Keep in mind that Hansen is looking for second-order normative effects of comparative philosophy, quite independent of the degree to which one might simply find what some other group says to be attractive. Suppose that, upon learning that Confucians place more value on funeral rituals than one’s own tradition, one decided, “I see the point of the Confucian practice, and think it’s better than what we have been doing; I henceforth embrace the value they place on mourning and funerals.” This is not a matter of moral tradition respect, but simply a first-
order moral judgment. Hansen’s focus is on cases when first-order disagreement persists. If
the rival tradition is just a series of unsupported assertions, Hansen says that comparative
philosophy gives us no further reason to respect or tolerate these beliefs, beyond our own
first-order moral beliefs in toleration. However, when the tradition is positively engaged in
defending its positions in light of reasoned critiques from its rivals, then we respect it as a
philosophical tradition. Hansen suggests as an analogy the way in which we “positively
excuse” someone for his or her good intentions and principled behavior, over and above the
more normal case of “negatively excusing” when we simply withhold blame after someone
makes a predictable mistake. Similarly, he argues that when a tradition exemplifies high
epistemic or philosophical standards by seriously engaging with rival positions, we respect
that tradition in such a way that we have an additional (or stronger) reason for the tolerance
of continued disagreement.

Moral tradition respect can lead to something else, as well. When, notwithstanding its
significant conceptual or theoretical differences from our own tradition, the alternative
tradition “satisfies some plausible condition for subjective rightness (e.g., has been
historically successful or leads to correct moral judgments),” Hansen argues that this can
“mildly destabilize” our own moral confidence (2004, 79). If we learn about a rich,
systematic tradition that agrees with our own judgments in some ways but disagrees in others,
this might make us slightly unsure whether there isn’t some defect in our own thinking. I will
wait until the third section of the essay to pursue Hansen’s few comments about how we
might follow up on this kind of destabilization, because Hansen (correctly, in my view) sees
that the follow-up has what I will call a disaggregated character. The attribution of moral
tradition respect, in contrast, functions at the holistic level. The holistic level of analysis also
dominates Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential conception of comparative ethics, to which we
now turn.
The concept of tradition has been at the core of much of MacIntyre’s writing on both the history of ethics and its present plight. As he uses the term, traditions exist only when a community engages in enquiry in accord with standards that they collectively recognize, and they do so self-consciously: “A tradition of enquiry is more than a coherent movement of thought. It is such a movement in the course of which those engaging in the movement become aware of it and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and carry its enquiries forward” (MacIntyre 1988, 326). The idea that the enquiries move “forward” is also key to tradition. Even though he is content with the idea that traditions may be (and see themselves as) intrinsically open and unfinished, he insists that traditions are capable of progress.\(^1\) In several writings, MacIntyre uses the inability of certain coherent movements of thought conclusively to answer their own questions as central evidence for concluding that they are not traditions.\(^2\) At least in broad outline, this conception of tradition is similar to Hansen’s sketch of those moral discourses that deserve moral tradition respect. In each case, the traditions are viewed as responsive to reasoning; as Hansen says, challenges are “seriously address[ed]” (2004, 78). For MacIntyre, and I believe also for Hansen, what counts as a robust or sound response to the objection is determined by standards internal to the tradition itself.

Hansen says that the mere fact that another tradition endorses a given norm does not give us a reason to believe it, though moral tradition respect leads to strengthened tolerance

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\(^1\) MacIntyre offers Thomism as an example of a tradition that is fundamentally open (MacIntyre 1990, 74 and 124).

\(^2\) See, for example, (MacIntyre 1990, 158–160), where he refers to both late-medieval scholastics and twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophers. MacIntyre makes an exception for Liberalism, which he says has become a tradition that self-consciously revolves around “perpetually elusive debate” (MacIntyre 1988, 343–4).
for the others and potentially to a mild destabilization of our own views. MacIntyre agrees that the mere fact of others’ different views does not give us any reason to change our own. Indeed, because he stresses the different (and even incommensurable) standards by which adherents of different traditions reason, he puts even more emphasis on this point than Hansen. Be this as it may, MacIntyre argues that it is possible for adherents of one tradition to see that their tradition is inferior to another, and to rationally choose to adopt the alternative tradition. One tradition can defeat another. Roughly, the story goes like this: (1) if we perceive our tradition to be in crisis, because it is repeatedly failing by its own standards; and (2) we come to understand the norms and reasoning of a different tradition, perhaps by learning it as a “second first language”; and (3) we furthermore see that the alternative tradition is not in crisis; and finally (4) we see how the alternative tradition can explain in its terms why our own tradition had failed: if all these happen, then we can rationally choose to adopt the new tradition. Because my interests lie elsewhere, I will not delve into the details of this process; suffice it to say that perhaps such a transition can take place.

MacIntyre suggests that in some cases one can “become a child all over again and learn [a] language — and the corresponding parts of the culture — as a second first language” (MacIntyre 1988, 374). Something like this can happen with anthropologists who live in the society of another culture; MacIntyre also says it is possible for “those with the requisite linguistic and historical skills” to use textual and other materials to become “surrogate participants” in earlier cultures and so to acquire ancient languages in a corresponding way.

MacIntyre discusses this kind of encounter between traditions in numerous writings. See especially his (1988) and (1989).

In fact, I am rather skeptical. MacIntyre (1990) uses this model to try to explain Aquinas’s synthesis of Aristotelianism and Augustinianism, but it is hard to see how this can work, since Thomism was not a pre-existing tradition. (Indeed, given the lack of uptake in
For present purposes, what is striking is that while MacIntyre regularly talks about
encounters between whole traditions and the possibility that one or the other may turn out to
be superior, he almost never discusses a more piecemeal process of learning from others.
When he does treat philosophers who explicitly draw on ideas or problematics from outside
their tradition, MacIntyre typically argues that the results are bad. For example, he discusses
certain nineteenth-century thinkers who sought to develop Thomism in response to what they
saw as challenges from Kant. MacIntyre says that this led one such philosopher to “absorb
into his own system a good deal of Kant and thereby, seemingly unwittingly, distort those
older positions by reworking them in Kantian terms” (1990, 70). Of course, MacIntyre may
be right that this particular philosopher’s work failed both philosophically and theologically;
my intention is not to defend this particular effort, but rather to highlight the lack of
recognition on MacIntyre’s part that good can ever come from working across traditions —
unless, he thinks, it is the good of coming to see another whole tradition as superior to one’s
own. Perhaps the clearest sign that MacIntyre views things this way comes in the way he
sketches a possible replacement for the liberal arts university. He takes the current situation
to be a pastiche of different books and viewpoints presented “neutrally,” shorn of their
connections to traditions. He proposes to replace this with a “post-liberal university of

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generations immediately following Aquinas, I am not sure that Thomism counts as a tradition
at all, at least prior to the nineteenth century; compare (ibid., 151).) Another possible example
is the switch of Chinese intellectuals from Confucianism to Liberalism (or Marxism) in the
early twentieth century. Two challenges to this view are first, whether whatever they
switched to counts as a tradition; and second, whether a neat “switch,” rather than a messier
(and less discontinuous) learning-from/appropriation model, best explains what happened. As
we will see below, Thomas Metzger has argued for a great deal of continuity between
Confucianism and both Chinese Liberalism and Chinese Marxism.
constrained disagreement.” It would seek to advance enquiry within various particular traditions, and to “enter into controversy with other rival standpoints” (1990, 231).

Comparison with others serves two purposes: it can help us understand ourselves better, by setting our views in relief against theirs; and it can, in extreme cases, lead to the conversion process discussed above. But nowhere in his discussion of the new university does MacIntyre reflect on other ways we might learn from others.

The reasons for MacIntyre’s lack of interest in piecemeal learning from others are not hard to find. He emphasizes the ways in which concepts and standards of reasoning are interdependent, embedded not just in discursive traditions but also in particular social structures and community activities. In this context, he takes a “piecemeal” approach to mean separating an issue out from the tradition and setting it up as a “problem” that can be identified and perhaps solved independently of the system of thought out of which it emerged. The “problem of free will” and the “mind-body problem” are good examples. MacIntyre worries that once attention is focused on “problems” existing separately from a particular tradition of enquiry, they will become irresolvable. Whether he is discussing late-medievals like Duns Scotus or contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, once the focus is on problems, any purported solution will be ad hoc and always subject to an equally ad hoc rebuttal (1990, 152 and 159). We will see in the final section that MacIntyre occasionally shows some interest in what I call “piecemeal progress,” which will help us connect his holistic insights with what I will characterize as the more routine work of comparative philosophy. There is no question, though, that MacIntyre’s main focus is on whole traditions, and he is worried about what happens when we step outside the framework of a tradition.

The third perspective to be canvassed here belongs to Thomas Metzger. Especially in his recent book *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash Between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today*, Metzger has emphasized the continuities between and
among various strands of pre-modern and modern Chinese political thinking. Because he wants to articulate deep continuities even where there appear to be dramatic differences — for instance, between contemporary Marxists, Liberals, and Confucians — he relies on the concept of discourse rather than tradition. It would be hard to argue that the core texts of the Marxists, Liberals, and Confucians are the same, or even have much in common. Each might count, in MacIntyre’s terms, as a tradition, but they surely do not collectively constitute a single tradition. Metzger’s analysis, however, seeks to show that they share a range of “rules for successful thinking” and various “indisputable” premises, such that they all belong to a single discourse. In a manner reminiscent of both Hansen’s and MacIntyre’s treatment of traditions, Metzger views discourses as dynamic conversations aimed at addressing unresolved or controversial issues, as defined by the framework of indisputables. Discourses are “on-going arguments,” rather than “static sets of mass belief” (2005, 77).

In order to make his case, Metzger insists that we look not at individual concepts or statements, but work out whole fields of meaning: to see which discourse a given thinker is operating in, we must tease out his or her epistemological and ontological presuppositions. On the basis of this type of analysis, Metzger demonstrates that broad patterns of similarity exist among many Chinese political thinkers, on the one hand, and that these are systematically different from many Western political thinkers, on the other. One example is the way in which participants in “Discourse #1” (in China) consistently resist, reject, or simply are blind to the results of what Metzger terms the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution (GMWER) and its resulting “epistemological pessimism.” In a complementary way, Metzger argues that Western theorists who participate in the GMWER-permeated “Discourse #2” have difficulty articulating the grounds for resolute moral progress. A major thesis of Cloud Across the Pacific is that Discourse #1 and Discourse #2 are saddled with complementary strengths and corresponding weaknesses, which he calls the
“Seesaw Effect” (2005, 118). These contrasting perspectives undergird the mutual misunderstandings Metzger observes in the political world today.

Metzger is ultimately interested in finding a way off the “seesaw.” He hopes that adequate mutual understanding and the application of “critical rationality” will enable us to collectively identify some synthetic position that is better than the current plight of either discourse. The overwhelming emphasis of his book, though, is on applying holistic analysis to show the pervasiveness of the two discourses. Metzger stresses that only when holistic description comes first can we identify the difference between “indisputables” and ideas that are genuinely up for grabs in a given context. He describes a disagreement with a colleague over whether a particular pair of ideas played an important role for a specific thinker, on whom the colleague had recently written a well-regarded book. Metzger suggests that his broader view enabled him to see that the mental process depicted by the pair of ideas “was logically integral to the whole structure of reality” as articulated by the text in question. As Metzger sees it, his own “desire to describe a body of thought as a whole” clashed with his colleague’s “intention to pull out those ideas in a text that shed light on certain issues important to him.” I dwell on this incident because it anticipates the comments I will make in the third section about the obstacles that Metzger’s penchant for holistic analysis places in the way of more piecemeal progress. Still, I believe that Metzger’s broad reading of discourse #1 and discourse #2 contains a great deal of insight. Holistic interpretation, as practiced by Hansen, MacIntyre, and Metzger, is vital to the work of comparative ethics, even if it is not the only thing that comparative ethicists should do.

**Dàotōng**

6 Metzger (2005, 70). The pair of ideas in question are “not yet issued (wèifā 未發)” and “already issued (yǐfā 已發),” which figure importantly in Metzger’s analysis of Neo-Confucianism in his (1977).
On both Hansen’s and MacIntyre’s accounts, a genuine tradition — worthy of our respect and perhaps of our allegiance, if our own tradition breaks down — is partly constituted by the activity of reasoning. Metzger has also emphasized the centrality of reasoning to well-functioning discourses. The discourse’s or tradition’s own standards help to determine what counts as reasoning within its framework, but the mere fact that adherents claim their tradition to be robust may not settle the issue. All three of our analysts believe that critics can legitimately challenge whether adequate reasoning is actually taking place. In slightly different ways, Hansen, MacIntyre, and Metzger have each argued, in particular, that modern Confucians have (so far) failed to shoulder the responsibility to defend and develop their tradition in light of various contemporary challenges. For example, Hansen strongly suggests that modern Confucianism may be either “a scholastic tradition (one that accords religious status to classical scriptures)” or else a tradition whose cultural dominance was rooted in “a political orthodoxy chosen by an emperor for its worth in sustaining his and his family’s dynasty” (2004, 88). If either of these is the best description of Confucianism, then it does not merit moral tradition respect. For his part, MacIntyre asserts that a principal obstacle to opening up philosophical conversation with Confucian moral theorists is “the failure of modern Confucians to debate adequately among themselves the crisis within Confucianism that should have been and sometimes has been generated by its encounter with modernity” (2004, 210). Metzger, finally, emphasizes the ways that modern Confucians persistently fail to grapple with the challenges raised by the GMWER and discourse #2.\(^7\)

My question in this section is whether these characterizations are correct, and more specifically whether modern Confucians have essentially admitted that they are not interested in taking external challenges seriously because of their commitment to a certain “

\(^7\) Metzger and MacIntyre, at least, are also highly critical of the modern Western moral discourse, but that is a separate issue from our present concern.
John Makeham nicely captures the surface meaning of ̀dàotông by translating it as the “interconnecting thread of the way”; Makeham remarks that the idea has “been employed since ソン times as a powerful tactic in the retrospective creation of lineages and ‘schools’ and also in the promotion of certain thinkers and the exclusion of others from privileged versions of just who and what constitutes orthodoxy.”

In the twentieth century, ̀dàotông has been used in both broad and narrow senses (Zhèng 2001, 138–43). The former stresses the many continuities in China’s scholarly, philosophical, and/or spiritual traditions; its main point is to contrast the richness and value of China’s culture with failings in the political realm. The narrower use — which in at least some ways has more in common with pre-twentieth century uses of ̀dàotông — pays more attention to specifying which specific thinkers in the tradition grasped the Way. This narrower meaning of ̀dàotông thus bears comparison to the traditional idea of “pànjiào 判教” or “distinguishing teachings,” according to which the views of different thinkers or even schools of thought are arranged hierarchically, depending on how closely they come to the full truth. Our main concern hereafter will be with how best to understand this narrower use of ̀dàotông, especially as seen in the philosophy of leading twentieth-century Confucian Móu Zōngsān (1909–1995) and in the insightful reading of Móu’s views offered by the contemporary scholar Zhèng Jiàdòng.

As is well known, Móu Zōngsān argued at considerable length that the standing interpretation of Neo-Confucianism into two main schools, as well as the tendency to valorize Zhū Xī as the tradition’s greatest figure, were both mistakes. Móu favored a reading of the tradition that stressed the insights of a series of thinkers he grouped into a third strand; on this view, Zhū Xī and his followers represented a subsidiary and partly wrong-headed direction of development. Móu’s version of the ̀dàotông passes through Zhāng Zāi, Hú Hóng, and Liú

8 Makeham (2008, 149). Makeham has also discussed the ̀dàotông idea in his (2003), and see more generally Wilson (1995).
Zōngzhōu, in particular, before being picked up in the early twentieth century by Xióng Shìlì. Zhèng Jiādòng explains that Móu found it important to trace the tóng or “interconnecting thread” through these different thinkers, rather than to explicate the dào directly, because of the great difficulty of stating clearly and simply the meaning of the Way. Still, Zhèng makes clear that Móu was not focused on the literal transmission of the Way from teacher to student; his interest is with those who got things right — who saw the same truth (2001, 186).9

A second, important aspect of Zhèng’s reading of Móu’s view of dàotóng is what we can loosely — and subject to the caveats below — call its religious dimension. Zhèng and other commentators have noted that Móu’s greatest priority was carrying on and teaching the Confucian Way (dào); his historical scholarship (xué 學) itself was of secondary importance. As historian Yu Yingshi puts it, “In accord with the Doctrine of the Mean’s statement that ‘Cultivating the Way is called teaching (jiào 敎),’ that which the New Confucians advocated was in fact ‘teaching (jiào)’ rather than what we commonly mean by ‘scholarship (xué).’”10

Yu elaborates his understanding of this distinction between jiào and xué by linking the former with the “highest truth” and viewing departures from jiào as heterodoxy, whereas he connects the latter with pluralism, relativism, and dependence on perspective. In other words, whereas a historian might acknowledge that there are a variety of illuminating perspectives on what took place in an earlier era and not insist that we choose only one as manifesting the whole truth, for the New Confucians their scholarship played a different role. They sought, through their construction of a dàotòng, to get at a deep and universal truth. This idea is connected to

9 We should not exaggerate the difference between the earlier mode of dàotòng and Mou’s approach, since earlier accounts of dàotòng have always included huge temporal leaps: from Yǔ to Tāng, Tāng to Wén, the Duke of Zhōu to Confucius, and (the biggest leap of all) from Mencius to whichever early-Sòng dynasty figure one prefers.

10 Quoted in (Zheng 2001, 188).
the stress one sees in figures like Xióng Shílì and Móu Zōngsān on the universal truth that
 can be seen in subjective moral experience: moral experience serves as a kind of personal
 witnessing of moral truth.\(^{11}\) Cultivating the \(dào\) is about attending to and properly
 understanding these experiences. As they understood both the Confucian tradition and their
 own work, articulating the route to experiencing this truth lies at the core; figures who had
 correctly seen this were to be studied as guides and taken as points-of-departure for further
 efforts to explicate and defend the tradition’s insights. Such an approach to the task of a
 Confucian contrasts with those who stress classical scholarship as an end-in-itself. “Classical
 commentary (\(jīngxué \)經學),” “Hàn Learning (漢學),” and philology — like the historical
 scholarship to which Yu Yingshi referred — were, according to Móu and other like-minded
 thinkers, of a decidedly secondary importance (Zhèng 2001, 190–91).

I said at the beginning of the last paragraph that I would be addressing the “religious”
 dimension of Móu’s \(dàotōng\). Readers may be wondering, though, where the “religious”
 appeared in the balance of that paragraph. Móu cares about \(dào\) more than \(xué\), even though
 he engages in a great deal of \(xué\); does that make his concerns “religious”\(^{12}\)? Even the word
 “teaching (\(jiào\))” is itself open to various interpretations, although we might say it has a
 practical, rather than abstract or academic, meaning.\(^{12}\) To some degree, it is apt to talk about

\(^{11}\) This is an important theme in several of their major writings. One accessible discussion is

\(^{12}\) “\(jiào\)” is part of the Chinese compound term that has been used for the last hundred years
to translate “religion”; “\(xué\),” by contrast, is part of the compound term used to translate
“philosophy.” “Confucianism” has several flavors in Chinese, including both “\(rújiào\)” and
“\(rúxué\).” The former is typically used when focusing on ritual or institutional practices; the
latter typically covers academic discussions. See Makeham (2008). On the other hand, in both
Confucian doctrine and about the “beliefs (xinyăng 信仰)” of individual Confucians.\textsuperscript{13}

However, I think the previous paragraph makes clear that when Zhèng Jiădòng refers to dào and jiăo, as opposed to xué, he is not emphasizing doctrine and beliefs.\textsuperscript{14} Instead, his focus is on lived moral experience: witnessing it, cultivating it, and theorizing it. Because xué points in the direction of scholarship for its own sake, Móu pushes in a different direction. Because “philosophy” in the present world is primarily an academic enterprise with little connection to lived moral experience, Zhèng Jiădòng calls Móu’s central concern “religious” (or “spiritual” (2001, 194)). But I think that a strong distinction between “philosophy” and “religion” is not particularly helpful here. After all, at various times in its past, “philosophy” has been more connected to people’s lived experience than it is at present.\textsuperscript{15} The priority that Móu puts on dào over xué may well suggest a critique of the way philosophy is understood and practiced — both in China and in the West — but it should not lead us to conclude that Móu is only interested in religious doctrine, rather than philosophical reasoning. Móu’s classical and Neo-Confucian times, xué was by no means a purely intellectual or academic notion: “learning” to become a sage was understood to be a concrete, if life-long, task.

\textsuperscript{13} Yu Yingshi says that his teacher Qian Mu’s attitudes toward Confucianism can be divided into two levels: the level of views about historical facts, and the level of belief (Zheng 2001, 191). Thomas Metzger’s extended discussion of Tang Junyi’s Confucianism likewise stresses certain tenets to which he held fast throughout his life (2005, ch. 2).

\textsuperscript{14} John Makeham is thus mistaken when he says that Zheng “invests the term dàotóng with a new sense to mean a core moral doctrine or set of teachings and ideals that forms the basis for a system of belief” (2008, 142).

\textsuperscript{15} See Hadot (1995) and both MacIntyre (1988) and (1990), which emphasize the embeddedness of genuine philosophical (and theological) traditions in communal structures and various facets of people’s lives.
concern with ðàotōng is not a “mere academic” interest in tracing genealogies; he believes that a proper understanding of ðàotōng is integral to arriving at philosophical truth and personal transformation.

Let us return now to the questions that opened this section. We are tracking the ways in which distinct moral traditions — and early Chinese ethics, in particular — can be relevant today, and are worried that modern Confucianism may poorly exemplify this relevance because it fails to merit moral tradition respect. Its attachment to a ðàotōng, the argument goes, means that neither non-Confucian Chinese nor any other outsiders have the extra reasons we discussed in the first section to respect or tolerate Confucianism. In fact, is the emphasis on ðàotōng that I have used Móu Zōngsān to exemplify actually inconsistent with others granting his tradition moral tradition respect?

A balanced assessment of the following four points leads, I think, to the conclusion that moral tradition respect is in fact warranted. First, we should certainly grant that sometimes and to some degree, the intensity with which Móu and others worked to establish their understanding of the ðàotōng served precisely the ulterior motives that Makeham identified: “the retrospective creation of lineages and ‘schools’ and also . . . the promotion of certain thinkers and the exclusion of others from privileged versions of just who and what constitutes orthodoxy.” Not only were pre-twentieth century thinkers promoted and excluded, but so, too, were figures from more recent times. Xióng Shílì and his students were given priority over Féng Yǒulán, for example. The reasons for this are complex; some are well in keeping with the legitimate uses of ðàotōng to which I am about to turn. At other times it is harder to be sure, but let us keep in mind that Móu was no sage: he was a flawed human subject to mixed motives. This should not impugn the very idea of concern with ðàotōng. Turning then to the second point, it is important to note that modern Confucians have been more engaged with the challenges raised or revealed by modernity than Hansen or MacIntyre
are aware. Even Metzger, who has written extensively on modern Confucianism, may not give them their full due. Elsewhere I have argued that Móu’s notion of “self-negation (zìwǒ kǎnxìàn 自我坎陷)” is a constructive way to respond to the tension between a virtue-based tradition like Confucianism and the need for democracy and human rights (Angle 2009, ch. 10–11). This is not the place to pursue that question, but suffice it to say that we can find considerable engagement between modern Confucians and both the theory and reality of modernity.16

My third point takes on the practice of dìàotōng-construction more directly. I believe that the general pànjiào-style appropriation of tradition is part and parcel of what philosophers do the world over. Consider the difference between the approach a contemporary Confucian philosopher might take to explaining the significance of a central concept like “coherence (lǐ 理)” in Neo-Confucianism, and the approach an intellectual historian would take.17 The philosopher is in dialogue with earlier thinkers in the tradition; rather than trying to say just what they said — as an historian might, in order to communicate their ideas to today’s audience — the philosopher may correct what an earlier figure said. The philosopher will not be beholden to actual genealogies, but may find some voices to be clearer and more insightful than others, and will emphasize those. To be sure, there is an aspect of historical understanding that is important here, if the philosopher is actually to be — and to be understood by others to be — developing the tradition rather than inventing out of whole cloth. This relates to one of Móu’s disagreements with Féng Yǒulán. Móu endorses

16 I pursue this issue specifically with regard to Metzger’s main argument in (Angle 2008). Another example is Mou’s extensive and detailed encounter with Kant. For a particularly good discussion, see Bunnin (2008).

17 I confess that I have in the back of my mind here the approach that I myself take toward “coherence,” on which see (Angle 2009, ch. 2).
Féng’s idea that modern Confucians can and must “continue (jiēzhe 接着)” the tradition rather than just “follow (zhàozhe 照着),” but Móu believes that Féng goes too far in leaving behind the core categories and problematic of Neo-Confucianism. In any event, whether one finds one’s point of departure in Plato, Aquinas, Locke, or Zhū Xī, all of this counts as constructing a dàotòng: a conversation with earlier thinkers aimed at better articulating the truth.

Fourth and finally, modern Confucianism is not, as Hansen worries, “a scholastic tradition (one that accords religious status to classical scriptures).” Móu’s dàotòng does express a commitment to a certain kind of religiosity: namely, what matters above all is encouraging people to understand and experience the Way. Thus understood, though, religiosity is no bar to reasoning. Indeed, much of MacIntyre’s work on the rationality of traditions focuses on reasoning within traditions that have a significant theological and religious component. Hansen’s suspicion about modern Confucianism should perhaps serve as a warning to us not to jump too quickly from the discovery that a tradition is not “pure” philosophy to the conclusion that it does not merit moral tradition respect. Both his and MacIntyre’s views on modern Confucianism also suggest the difficulties attending a judgment about another tradition. Modern Confucian writings are often dense and difficult and, as is especially relevant for a non-sinologist like MacIntyre, mostly unavailable in

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18 Feng introduces the distinction at (Feng 2001, 4); Mou’s disagreement is discussed in (Zheng 2001, 142).

19 The only exception I find is the Liberal tradition. MacIntyre explicitly argues that Liberalism has become a tradition, but it is an odd one, characterized by continuous, perpetually inconclusive, but nonetheless socially effective debate about the principles of justice (MacIntyre 1988, 343-4).
translation. This makes the work of comparative philosophers in facilitating mutual understanding all the more important.

**Disaggregation**

In the first section we saw a variety of ways in which holistic approaches to traditions and discourses have been mobilized by comparative philosophers. The second section explored a Confucian idea that bears some relation to the idea of a “tradition,” and found that in the case of modern Confucian Móu Zōngsān, at least, his concern for a *dàotōng* should not stand in the way of our seeing him as a philosopher, engaged in criticism and argumentation and open to cross-tradition engagement. It is now time to ask what comparative philosophers who emphasize holistic comparison might be missing. We will see that each of our main subjects has at least something to say about more piecemeal comparative work, but each also leaves us short of a full-fledged understanding.

Recall that Chad Hansen argued that when we come to have “moral tradition respect” for an alternative tradition, it can mildly destabilize our commitment to our own norms. He adds that when this happens, we will wonder whether, working together with thinkers in the other tradition, we might be able to generate a moral view that synthesizes the insights of the two traditions and which would seem, from both our perspectives, to be superior to our starting points. Hansen suggests that this kind of thought undergirds the cherished ideal of universal moral synthesis. He adds, though, that he doubts that comparative philosophers have a major role to play in this process. They cannot serve as “moral prophets” who declare the truth based on their familiarity with both traditions. Instead, Hansen writes:

The move to synthesis must take place as each moral community gradually shifts. It would have to be motivated mainly by its own norms with the addition only of the mild skepticism induced by granting moral tradition respect to the other. In effect, it would have to be a bottom-up, gradual change. That is, a Chinese theorist would have
to make arguments that convince other Chinese given their existing norms, experiences, and assumptions. Similarly, a Western advocate has to make first-order normative arguments. (2004, 81)

I believe that this is extremely well said. When moral growth takes place in response to stimulus from another tradition, it is typically through this kind of bottom-up, gradual change, throughout which we continue to feel beholden to our own norms, even if they themselves are gradually changing. However, Hansen downplays the importance of comparative work in facilitating just the kind of piecemeal progress he’s just sketched. For example, he says a few lines later:

Let us suppose that each is aware of and appreciates the other moral tradition. Still, I suggest, it is improbable that these comparativists will successfully convince other members of their home community to reject an existing moral attitude simply by citing its status in the foreign scheme. That may count as a reason for initiating a moral debate about it, but not a reason for accepting the moral attitude in question.

(ibid., emphasis added)

Again, this is very persuasive, except for the implausible first sentence. One of the upshots of the second section of the present essay is that Hansen himself has quite a shallow understanding of modern Confucianism, and thus is not well-positioned to appreciate its values and arguments. As we proceed, I will draw on what Hansen says about the requirement that people be convinced by their own norms, but resist the idea that comparative philosophers have little role beyond the holistic project of identifying when moral tradition respect is warranted.

Our discussion of MacIntyre in the first section uncovered very little interest on his part in discussions that involve one aspect of a tradition engaging with one aspect of another tradition. Instead, his attention is focused on cases in which all the values and concepts of a
tradition, taken as an aggregate, are compared to another whole tradition. Now I want to acknowledge that there are occasional moments when he suggests other possibilities. In particular, consider the following passage that comes well into his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* — a book that explores the conceptions of justice found within several different Western traditions. After having wended his way through many developments in each of these traditions, MacIntyre says:

> A tradition becomes mature just insofar as its adherents confront and find a rational way through or around those encounters with radically different and incompatible positions which pose the problems of incommensurability and untranslatability. An ability to recognize when one’s conceptual resources are inadequate in such an encounter, or when one is unable to frame satisfactorily what others have to say to one in criticism and rebuttal, and a sensitivity to the distortions which may arise in trying to capture within one’s own framework theses originally at home in another are all essential to the growth of a tradition whose conflicts are of any complexity or whose mutations involve transitions from one kind of social and cultural order to another and from one language to another. (1988, 327)

This seems to be open to the idea that encounters between traditions need not be all-or-nothing: a specific challenge from another tradition can lead to “growth.” The trouble is that I do not find the sentiments expressed here to be fully exemplified in MacIntyre’s lengthy exposition of the developments of the traditions themselves. What happens when one recognizes an inadequacy in conceptual resources? We need to hear more about how “growth” can take place as a response to such a realization.²⁰

²⁰ An indication of MacIntyre’s actual ambivalence about the idea that encounter with another tradition can spur piecemeal growth is his treatment of Aquinas. In his 1988 book he treats Aquinas as emerging from a single tradition that encompasses Aristotle, Augustine, and
In the first section above I highlighted Thomas Metzger’s stress that holistic understanding must be prior to particular comparisons or challenges. Unless we base our understandings on broad interpretations of whole discourses, he argues, we may well miss some of the key “indisputable” premises that lie behind more innocuous-sounding statements. To some degree this mirrors MacIntyre’s concern about “problem”-based philosophical argument. MacIntyre charges that problem-based argument is \textit{ad hoc} and unending, because it has lost its framework of tradition-based reasoning; similarly, Metzger worries that attention to specific problems, without attending to the background discourses, results in interminable “clashes” rather than genuine understanding. As indicated above, there is much to learn from such holistic perspectives. Indeed, although I cannot pursue the matter here, I am persuaded that the correct theory of meaning is holistic in nature.\footnote{See (Angle 2002, ch. 2), (Angle 2008), and especially (Angle 2006).} However, holism others (1988, 205). That sounds like growth within a tradition. In his slightly later \textit{Three Rival Versions} book, however, Aquinas founds a new tradition that synthesizes the pre-existing, and incompatible, traditions of Aristotelianism and Augustinianism (MacIntyre 1990, 120). Another hint that MacIntyre recognizes that piecemeal progress is possible comes in an essay on comparative approaches to Confucian ethics. He raises a series of challenges to modern Confucians — and many of them are insightful, notwithstanding his lack of knowledge about modern Confucianism, as noted above — and then goes on to acknowledge an area in which contemporary Thomist moral theorists (that is, those working within the moral tradition that MacIntyre himself finds most congenial) need to learn from Confucians. He says: “About the relationship between respect for ceremonial forms and the practice of virtues…, we (Thomistic) Aristotelians do have a good deal to learn from Confucians, and I hope that we are duly grateful” (MacIntyre 2004b, 158).
comes with costs. Three are worth our noting here. First, holism makes it relatively difficult to talk about, or even to recognize, differences among thinkers who participate in a single discourse. Second, there is a related tendency to dichotomize rather than seeing a spectrum of differences, since the analyst will try to fit each figure into one or another full system of meaning. Finally, the holistic approach makes it somewhat harder to do justice to changes to discourses. To be sure, one can still talk about self-criticism within the confines of a given discourse, which I would call “internal criticism.” The most significant changes, however, often occur at the margins between discourses or communities. Critical encounters with other traditions tend to be much more piecemeal, partially mediated through existing language and concepts, and have more ambiguous results. For all the explanatory power of Metzger’s or MacIntyre’s inclusive, holistic approaches, the changes that have taken place — and the room for future changes — are obscured.

To counteract an excessively single-minded emphasis on holism, I recommend we consider the value of partially disaggregating a tradition or discourse. As one sets about interacting with people from other backgrounds, thinking about one’s own values in a disaggregated way can help one to arrive at a certain level of mutual understanding or agreement. Michael Walzer has put this in terms of “thin” values; unlike “thick” values, when we talk in terms of thin values we do not concern ourselves with their underlying justification, full meaning, or broad inferential connections. We just seek to find superficial common ground with others (Walzer 1994). This strategy was put into practice by the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and made explicit by Jacques Maritain, a philosopher charged with summarizing the views of the world’s philosophers on human rights. He famously wrote that “Yes, we agree about the rights, but on condition that no one asks us why” (Maritain 1949, 9). We can in fact go farther than this, and say that

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22 The remainder of this paragraph, and the next one, draw on (Angle 2008).
when, from a disaggregated stance, an agent comes to value something that is given more weight in other groups than in his or her own — for instance, when a Muslim political thinker comes to embrace the value of human rights — he or she may be prompted to re-examine his or her own traditions and see if they can be revised so as to give the value in question a firmer footing in the local tradition. In addition, the disaggregated stance allows more room for minority voices to come to the fore. To be sure, one cannot push disaggregation too far. After all, it relies on temporarily resisting many of the inferential connections that give our words their meaning. Alternatively, we might see it as an effort to temporarily step away from some of the social norms whose “inertia” exerts a mighty influence on what we are able to say to one another, and even understand. As such, the disaggregative perspective is fragile and prone to error. So both as agent engaged in cross-cultural dialogue, and as analyst seeking to understand such conversations, we must cautiously balance the holistic and disaggregative perspectives.

As a way to flesh out what I mean, let us consider a recent essay in which Metzger quite explicitly thinks about a kind of disaggregation and its relation to moral progress (Metzger 2008). Metzger’s essay is a response to a keynote lecture delivered in 2004 at a conference on New Confucianism by the eminent scholar Láo Sīguāng (Láo 2006), which itself is concerned with the possibilities for the future relevance of Confucianism. Very briefly, Láo asks whether the New Confucian model of developing (kāichū 開出) an internal Confucian response to the challenges of modernity is likely to succeed, and answers in the negative. He believes that if Confucianism is to have a constructive role in the future, it must first be “disaggregated (dǎsàn 打散)” so that its “open” ideas having “universal value” can be used to solve certain existing problems, thus contributing to “world culture” (2006, 12–13).

For an important instance of this process, see (An-Na’im 1990). Charles Taylor explores some similar ideas in (Taylor 1999).
Before turning to Metzger’s reaction, three quick items. First, if we were to ask Hansen what he thought of Láo’s suggestion, he would probably respond that Confucianism does not appear to be playing any significant role. Láo apparently does not view it as possessing viable responses to current challenges, and so it probably does not warrant moral tradition respect. Insofar as it contains ideas that are of universal significance, furthermore, Láo suggests that the source of these ideas in Confucianism has no particular importance; people working out of another tradition could just as well come up with them. Second, for his part, MacIntyre would insist that in abandoning any framework of tradition-based reasoning, Láo has lost whatever footing would enable him to make judgments about which ideas are “open” and which “closed.” Within the context of the development of a tradition, it may be possible to identify and discard “closed” elements of the tradition that are leading to problems (Láo 2006, 7), but if we set this process outside of all traditions, MacIntyre would anticipate interminable disagreement. Third, I want to emphasize that Láo’s idea of disaggregation is different from mine. Where I am suggesting a need for tentative and temporary disaggregation, Láo’s idea leans more in the direction of breaking open the Confucian tradition once-and-for-all, and then rummaging within it for ideas that can be used elsewhere.

Metzger is more friendly to Láo’s vision than MacIntyre would be. Metzger approves of the general idea of working toward a “philosophical unification” (2008, 69). He rejects what he calls the ideal of a “multiphilosophical” world, with “each culture parochially developing its own philosophies, uninterested in philosophies being developed elsewhere” (ibid., 67). This is not to say that he views such a conception as unintelligible; indeed, Metzger says that “many Chinese philosophers today see themselves as pursuing the development of ‘Chinese philosophy,’ not as pursuing ‘philosophy’ to determine how Chinese culture should be revised” (ibid.). Like Láo, though, Metzger believes that such a parochial approach is closed-minded and doomed to irrelevance. Metzger wants philosophers
to recognize that a grounding in historical texts and traditions is necessary as a “first step methodologically required by the pursuit of any philosophically critical understanding,” but he simultaneously demands “a multicultural, comparative intellectual history, instead of assuming . . . that one ancient segment of intellectual history included a somehow perfect or ‘natural’ understanding of the norms all human should follow (dàotōng)” (ibid., 63–64). He says that the identification “of inherited cultural premises with universal truth” is central to the New Confucians’ idea of dàotōng, but we must resist this identification because others equally have their dàotōng (ibid., 71). If the pursuit of “open” ideas is to mean anything, we cannot exempt any culturally inherited content from critical scrutiny. Metzger’s main criticism of Láo, in fact, ends up being that Láo’s critique of New Confucian ideas does not run deep enough. Láo speaks of “learning to achieve virtue (chéngdé zhī xué 成德之學)” as a core, valuable, and potentially “open” Confucian orientation. Metzger contends that in so doing, Láo fails to distance himself adequately from Confucian “epistemological optimism” (2008, 75).

Metzger’s belief that we are faced with a choice between a “multiphilosophical world” and “philosophical unification” suggests to me that his dichotomization of holism and disaggregation is too stark. We can also see this in his treatment of Láo: on the one hand, he not only embraces Láo’s quite extreme notion of disaggregation, but also suggests that Láo himself is still stuck with problematic Confucian ideas — in other words, Láo’s view is not disaggregated enough. On the other hand, Metzger’s evidence for this characterization of Láo is (roughly) that Láo speaks of “learning to achieve virtue” as a valuable thing. Metzger leaps from this to the conclusion that Láo is guilty of epistemological optimism. This would only follow, though, if the only way to think about “learning to achieve virtue” required a problematic kind of optimism. Here we see Metzger’s radical holism at work. If there is any hint of Confucian “sage” talk, he convicts the speaker of being a card-carrying Neo-
Confucian. But this is too fast. Between extreme epistemological pessimism and extreme optimism, there is considerable space. Ideas of virtue and sagehood are also compatible with many different metaphysical and epistemological views. A key to pushing a tradition forward is that even while we are conscious of the many entailments among the concepts and values of the tradition, we can resist some of those entailments — we can temporarily disaggregate some of the concepts — in order to explore what happens if we respond to old challenges in new ways, or come to see new challenges to which the tradition had made our predecessors blind. Although MacIntyre says very little about such activity — which requires working both within and across traditions — it may be what he had in mind when he talks about growth in response to challenges from another tradition. Unlike Metzger’s quest for philosophical consensus, this kind of growth is driven by the quest for the *dào*, for truth and goodness, as viewed from within a given tradition.\(^{24}\) It is nonetheless dependent on openness to other philosophical traditions, and so does not collapse into a polarized multiphilosophical world. In other words, to work in this mode is to do what I have started calling “rooted global philosophy.”

Hansen’s talk of moral tradition respect and the possibility that it can mildly destabilize us fits in well with this way of thinking. In conclusion, it remains only to comment again on Hansen’s lovely assumption that, in a given context, “each is aware of and appreciates the other moral tradition.” If that were true, then we would all be comparative philosophers. I think this is precisely the goal toward which we should be working: all philosophical activity should be at least implicitly comparative. For the foreseeable future, specialized skills and background will often be needed to facilitate such openness. Still, all of

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\(^{24}\) As we saw in Section Two, the notion of *dàotòng* need not be inimical to openness and growth.
us can strive to learn to balance holism and disaggregation so that we can promote local, piecemeal progress within our home traditions.

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