Review of Cua - Moral Vision and Tradition

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Antonio Cua is a prolific author, with four books and some fifty articles to his credit. For all that, he is not as widely cited, nor as widely read, as several of his contemporaries or juniors in the field of Chinese philosophy. There are at least two reasons for this comparative neglect. First, his writing is often dense and technical, and his essays weighed down by references to others of his writings wherein, one is told, concepts relied on in the current essay are more carefully explained. Second, Cua’s methodology may be off-putting to some. He is upfront about working creatively, sometimes experimentally, to generate a Confucian moral theory that is cognizant of the concerns of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, even while it challenges them. This is not—or not merely—textual interpretation, but what is sometimes called “New Confucianism.” Those who simply seek to understand the Chinese tradition in its original context might believe that such an approach offers them little.

In such a context, Moral Vision and Tradition is extremely welcome, and should help Cua to reach the audience he deserves. The book is a collection of fourteen essays, four of which have not been published previously in their current form; the earliest of the previously published essays dates from 1973. Cua has chosen the material carefully and well. The essays are lucid and accessible, and while there are still many footnotes to essays and books not included in the collection, one can readily comprehend and evaluate Cua’s arguments without reliance on anything outside the volume. Moral Vision and Tradition is thus an ideal introduction to Cua’s thought. In the balance of this review I will highlight some of the richness that can be found in the book, by way of suggesting that being introduced to Cua’s thought is a very good idea, indeed.

The collection is aptly named, since one of its guiding themes is that one can develop a vibrant and significant moral vision on the basis of the Confucian ethical tradition. Cua situates his work in the context of recent Western philosophical concern with the importance of traditions, and simultaneously contributes to those discussions and to the more specific question of how one committed to a Confucian moral vision should interpret the Confucian tradition. His reading of Zhu Xi’s notion of daotong as “a point of departure for the critical development of Confucian moral philosophy” (p. 247) is brilliant, in that Cua is able to find the grounds for creative moral development within a notion long thought to be a paradigm of stifling orthodoxy. Such a perspective is important today, and I might add that it can also be important for understanding what Zhu Xi and his fellows in fact took themselves to be doing.

At the center of Cua’s interpretation of the Confucian moral vision lies the idea of dao as an “ideal theme.” The distinction between ideal theme and ideal norm runs throughout the book. Where an ideal norm provides specific guidance for one’s
way of life, an ideal theme speaks to the style of one’s life: it is an orientation, rather than a specific pattern of behavior. Drawing on a number of texts, chief among which is the Doctrine of the Mean, Cua argues that Confucianism’s ideal theme is dao, or ren understood broadly, both of which can be loosely glossed as a caring harmony between man and the world. Cua goes on to reflect on the different ways in which paradigmatic individuals have sought to realize this ideal in their lives, and on the attitude that common moral strivers like ourselves should take up toward these moral exemplars.

Cua ties this idea of ideal theme both to the virtue-based, rather than principle-based, nature of Confucian ethics, and to the nature of Confucian argumentation as aiming at situated reasonableness, rather than abstract rationality. He has much to say on each of these important topics. He is sensitive to the many ways that principles can function in differing moral contexts, and closes the collection with an essay that develops a set of Confucian-derived principles for cross-cultural moral adjudication. He argues that Confucians will always look first to arbitration, but that principle-based adjudication can still play a legitimate role for Confucian agents. Cua’s discussion of cooperative arbitration, in which one aims to reasonably persuade one’s audience, is nuanced and insightful. He draws on a wide range of recent literature on informal reasoning, urging that the kind of ethical argumentation he sees foregrounded in Confucianism is both legitimate and more pervasive than many have realized. As in so many places in the collection, Cua here speaks both to those concerned with the Chinese texts in particular, and to those interested in moral philosophy more generally.

Cua’s work is important and deserves a wider readership. It is a mistake to think that one can understand philosophical texts without taking them seriously as philosophy, which means to engage with them critically, as Cua has. This is not to say that Cua has given us the final word on Confucianism, either as historical tradition or as contemporary moral vision. What he offers are novel and well-reasoned ideas and interpretations whose challenges many of us would do well to heed.