Comparative Philosophy: Reviewing the State of the Art

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Comparative Philosophy: Reviewing the State of the Art

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Introduction

Stephen C. Angle

The morning of the last Sunday in the semester, I arrived at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Humanities a little before 9:00 am. The conference was scheduled to begin at 9:30, and I was more nervous than usual, even though I was not scheduled to present a paper. Today was to be a student conference, the first of its kind that I had ever organized, and the presenters were the fifteen students in my “Comparative Philosophy” seminar. Each had chosen a recent book that engaged in comparative philosophy and today would be presenting a critical reflection on the book. The books chosen by the fourteen undergraduates and one master’s candidate ranged widely in subject matter, though by design they all were connected to one degree or another to East Asian—and in all cases but one, Chinese—philosophy. I had divided the students into five three-person panels; each presenter had fifteen minutes, and each panel would be followed by half an hour of discussion. We had coffee breaks scheduled and lunch to be delivered. But would they show up early on a Sunday morning?

Of course they did. The presentations were terrific; the discussion, rich and challenging. The essays contained in this volume are based on that conference, and constitute the final projects for each of the students in the class. Several ideas lie behind the decision to gather the papers together and present them collectively to readers around the world. Part of the motivation was pedagogical. Knowing that they were not writing just for their teacher—indeed, that in principle the author of the book they review might read what they have written—proved inspirational to the students, many of whom would say that their contribution here constitutes their finest work to date. And I hope that readers will agree that the quality of these essays is very high.

Beyond this rather practical issue, though, lie three more substantive reasons for presenting the fifteen essays together. The first concerns the nature of “comparative philosophy.” Over the course of a semester in which we read quite a bit about the methodologies that might count as “comparative,” the pros and cons of such comparative undertakings, and then the fifteen books themselves (all students read at least one chapter of each of the fifteen books)—over such a semester, we became convinced that many different approaches count as “comparative philosophy,” all of which have value if executed well. I believe we arrived at something like the following common understanding of what comparative philosophy is:

Comparative philosophy is doing philosophy by drawing on at least two significantly different traditions.

There are some purposely vague terms in this definition—what is “doing philosophy”? how different do things have to be to be “significantly different”? and so on—about which I will say more below. The key point for now is to see that comparative philosophy need not be confined to straightforward comparisons. Even in the first section of this book, devoted to books featuring
“pairs” of philosophers, readers will find that comparative philosophy is more than just asking whether two things are similar or different. Collectively this book shows the range of things that can count as comparative philosophy.

A second reason why it is important to engage in detail with examples of comparative philosophy is that most of what one plausibly can say about the methodology of comparative philosophy is rather bland if limited to abstract formulas. To questions like “how much generalization,” “how much historical context,” “how much reinterpretation,” or “how much use of one’s own framework,” the answers tend to be: “it depends on the project and its goals,” and “use enough but not too much.” Are conceptual differences or dissimilar evaluative standards problems? That, too, seems to depend on the details. So we offer here a wealth of details. I will sketch some of the lessons that might be drawn from the fifteen case studies at the end of this Introduction, but the main upshot of the volume is that different projects need to be treated differently.

The final reason for presenting all of these reviews together is to celebrate the coming of age of comparative philosophy. Eight of the books reviewed here have been published in the last three years (including one scheduled for publication later in 2016), and these are hardly the only recent works. While work in comparative philosophy—and on the study of non-Western philosophies on which comparative philosophy in part depends—still faces barriers and detractors, it is hard to deny the sophistication of the books under review here. According to this volume’s reviews, of course, even the excellent books under consideration here still may leave room for future improvement. These books and their respective reviews, though, make clear how much exciting, constructive philosophy is made possible by comparative approaches.

Recall now the definition I have offered of comparative philosophy: doing philosophy by drawing on at least two significantly different traditions. The first component of the definition is “doing philosophy.” What is it to do philosophy? One kind of answer to this question is to offer an encompassing overview, such as systematic reflection on our existence or Wilfrid Sellars’s well-known suggestion that philosophy is to seek “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” I think that these are useful, and usefully open-ended, ways of thinking about philosophy. It is also useful, though, to answer “what is it to do philosophy” in terms of the kinds of activities involved. I submit that there are (at least) two, often inter-related activities that are present to varying degrees in virtually all philosophy: grappling with problems and grappling with history. I say “grappling” because while sometimes philosophers understand ourselves to be straight-forwardly trying to solve a philosophical problem, at other times we may want to challenge the importance of a given problem or argue for the relevance of a different problem. As for history, often this is quite explicit, as when we seek to understand the ideas of one or more past thinkers. Even here, the concern with problems never disappears: the history of philosophy differs from intellectual history precisely in that the former is always sensitive to the truth or import of the philosophical issues with which the historical figures themselves were concerned. And to the extent that problem-solving philosophy of the present day is ignorant of or disengaged with its own history, this can precisely become a point of philosophical criticism.

1 Garfield and Van Norden 2016, and the many comments thereto, testifies to some of these continued challenges.
2 Sellars 1963, 1.
No matter whether mainly historical or mainly problem-oriented, then, comparative philosophy will contain both dimensions. Furthermore, we will see that the point of drawing on multiple traditions, rather than just on one, will inevitably be bound up at least in part with the problem-solving aspect of philosophy. Before getting to that, though, I need to make two things clear about what “drawing on” philosophical traditions entails. First, “drawing on” is deliberately broader than “comparing.” Although “comparative philosophy” seems to me to be a perfectly good label for our subject in this volume, comparative philosophy is never merely about comparing two things. It of course does involve comparisons of many kinds; indeed, it is hard to imagine any kind of philosophy that completely eschews comparison—for instance, X came before Y or A is more plausible than B. Furthermore, given the definition I am advocating, comparisons between (at least) two “significantly different” traditions will always be involved in some way in comparative philosophy. As we will see, though, the requirement that comparative philosophy entails engagement with philosophical problems—in one way or another, as discussed above—means that it is never content with descriptive comparisons like “this idea or text or argument is like (or unlike) that idea or text or argument.” Even when such comparisons form a large part of comparative philosophical project, there will always be something more going on.

Second, using “drawing on” also allows me to emphasize that comparative philosophy can and should avoid wholesale comparison of distinct, monolithic cultures. Ralph Weber has shown that too often comparisons are framed in terms of different cultures, such that no matter what the specific comparison might be, the ultimate conclusion is explained by the difference between “Western” and “Chinese” culture. Among other problems, this would make it very difficult for philosophers working in one tradition to learn from culturally distinct “others,” no matter whether it be via straight-forward discovery of a solution to “our” problem in “their” tradition, or more indirectly by some aspect of “their” tradition catalyzing a new development in “our” tradition. We can allow for both of these types of learning, in contrast, if we de-center both cultures (or, for that matter, traditions) and comparison within the work of comparative philosophy. We cannot avoid comparison, I have already said; I also think we cannot avoid insisting that multiple traditions play roles, as I will explain further below. But this does not mean that a given instance of comparative philosophy needs to be structured around the comparison of two cultures. Instead, problems generated within one or another philosophical tradition can serve as the drivers for comparative philosophising, thus dramatically pluralising the terms in which comparisons are made—as we will see in the books under review here.

The last part of my definition of comparative philosophy states that it must involve “at least two significantly different traditions.” This proviso articulates what I suggest we call the “constitutive gamble” of comparative philosophy. To see why it is a gamble—and why it might nonetheless be a worthwhile bet—it will help to think for a moment about non-comparative philosophy. The contrast that I have in mind can best be brought out if we think of non-comparative philosophy along the lines of what Thomas Kuhn famously termed “normal science”: that is, scientific investigation that is in keeping with existing paradigms of experimental technique and existing assumptions about the key questions to be answered in a

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3 Weber 2013, esp. 600.
given area of science. Non-comparative philosophy is like this. It seeks to make progress within the bounds of currently defined categories and problems. This is not to say that it is easy, nor that progress within such a paradigm is impossible or unimportant. Still, bigger changes have the potential to emerge by breaking open the limited scope of non-comparative inquiry.

We have no guarantee that such “bigger changes” will be viewed as coherent, constructive, and convincing from any relevant perspective, and this is what makes comparative philosophy a gamble. To some degree, any instance of philosophical creativity is a gamble, but new moves made within an existing game are much easier to comprehend and assess, so work within a tradition is much less risky than work that crosses multiple traditions. This is why it makes sense to emphasize the constitutive gamble of comparative philosophy. At the same time, drawing on multiple traditions allows for greater novelty and more room to explore new, stimulating ideas. Each in his or her own way, comparative philosophers aim to change the games that contemporary philosophers are playing.

To round out this discussion of the meaning of comparative philosophy, I now take up three questions that might naturally be asked about my proposal. First, how much difference is required for two traditions to be “significantly” different? To the extent that language, assumptions, and history are not shared among two different traditions, then to that extent they are significantly different. There of course will be differences of degrees. Some clear instances are Chinese Buddhist philosophers like Guifeng Zongmi (780-841) who worked across Chinese and Indic traditions; Thomas Aquinas (1125-1274) who worked across Christian and Greek traditions; and Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) who worked across Chinese and German traditions. And of course all the authors whose books are reviewed here are contemporary examples.

A second question is: can conceptual differences undermine the possibility of comparative philosophy? Often this question is put in terms of “incommensurability,” which itself has been understood in several different ways. Much ink has been spilled on this topic, but I think we can safely draw the following conclusion from all the debate: conceptual differences make comparative philosophy interesting and difficult, but not impossible. Exactly how to handle conceptual differences depends on the details of the materials on which one is drawing, and on the audience(s) one is trying to reach. The devil is in the details, so we need to look at individual projects and assess their success in doing philosophy while respecting their source materials (see, for example, the chapters by Lemieux, McGill, and Hall).

A final question concerns Kwong-loi Shun’s diagnosis that an “asymmetry” plagues comparative philosophy, which Tim Connolly has generalized as the problem of “one-sidedness.” Shun puts the point this way:

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4 See Kuhn 1970.
5 Just to be clear: what I am calling “non-comparative philosophy” will still involve comparisons, since (as noted already) any philosophical activity involves comparison. It is not “comparative” in the sense defined here, however.
6 For example, see Wong 1989 and Connolly 2015, chs. 4-5.
7 For some arguments to this effect, see Angle 2002 and Angle 2006.
There is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions. Conversely, in the contemporary literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions.

I agree with Professor Shun that there has been such an asymmetry, and furthermore that asymmetry of this kind may well be a problem. If local, idiosyncratic experiences from moments in Greek, Roman, or European history are taken as normative expectations for all of humanity, this should trouble us. Of course, the mere fact that a category is first articulated in one particular context does not mean that it cannot be legitimately applied in others. Genuine problems occur only when differences in global power lead us to only consider some putatively universal categories—say, those derived from European experience which happen to mesh particularly well with contemporary capitalism—and to ignore others that also make universal claims. Asymmetry and one-sidedness are thus not mainly criticisms of individual works, but of broader trends. Based on the evidence of this volume, it may be that the problem is lessening, but by no means gone. Some of the books under review explicitly privilege non-Western categories (see especially the chapters by Fintel and Terrass-Shah), but a theme in a number of chapters concerns the influence of Western values or assumptions on the projects they are reviewing (see especially the chapters by He, Macdonald, and Ho).

I have organized the reviews into six parts, based on either the structure or content of the books under review. We begin with three books that adopt what might be the most common approach: two thinkers, each from different traditions, are compared with one another. In each case, it is particularly important to ask what the point of the comparison is: since any two things are both similar and different, we expect pairings within comparative philosophy to have philosophical payoffs. Lemieux, Pastor, and He all examine whether this goal has been adequately met.

The second part is titled “Sequences,” since both books discussed here share the idea that, among philosophers dealing with roughly similar questions, problems that arise for A might be solveable by B, while those arising for B might be tractable for C, and so on. Again, we must face the question of what the lesson of the sequence might be, beyond an illuminating introduction to the various philosophers under discussion. Parke and McGill interrogate their authors on this score and offer intriguing suggestions for further development of their ideas.

Part 3, “Contemporary Applications,” looks at two books that explicitly aim to intervene in debates over contemporary norms by putting ancient Chinese ideas into conversation with contemporary theorists and socio-political practices. Both Barker and Macdonald find themselves in considerable sympathy with the practical goals of the two books under review, though both also wonder—Macdonald more explicitly than Barker, to be sure—about the reasons why early Chinese philosophy is necessary in order to learn the relevant lessons.

Next we turn to two books that engage with Neo-Confucianism, though they are otherwise very different. Lee reviews a book that explores the movement and transformation of

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9 Shun 2009, 470.
ideas from India to China, and Hall looks at arguments that Neo-Confucians can solve problems bedeviling contemporary, Western, analytic philosophers. Issues of conceptual change and conceptual difference are front-and-center in both cases, showing how subtle questions of sufficiently respecting one’s source material can be.

In Part 5, I group three books together under the rubric of “global philosophy,” by which I mean philosophy that seeks to draw openly on multiple traditions as it sees fit, aimed at a global, cross-cultural audience rather than at researchers within a single tradition. This does not mean that the authors under review naively assume that languages, traditions, and so on do not matter—and indeed, the book Herwitz reviews acknowledges that on many issues, we are appropriately content to stick with our local values and frameworks—but rather that we can see in their methodology an aspiration toward a more global philosophical practice. (I suppose this is true of many of the books reviewed in the volume, to be honest!) Fong explores an influential effort to read Confucianism through a lens tinted by Kantian philosophy; Ho looks at the way that pragmatist and process philosophy might be re-oriented through an encounter with Neo-Confucianism; and Herwitz looks at an ambitious attempt to put the moral thought of multiple traditions and much of modern psychology into a new kind of conversation.

The book’s final part, “New Methodologies,” covers three books that are distinctive for employing—and in some cases advocating—different approaches to their subject matters than most of the books under review. Jeong looks at a book that relies on interviews and the reading of literature to articulate the “philosophy” it examines; Fintel’s subject is a book employing an updated version of Chinese Buddhist thought—the author calls it Neo-Tiantai—to re-examine a range of modern philosophical and cultural issues; and Terrass-Shah engages with an ambitious call for theorists to enlarge not just our subject matter, but the ways we understand and practice “theory” itself. Whether or not we find the methodological novelty in these three books completely compelling, this final part serves as a fitting coda to the volume, suggesting that as philosophers around the globe continue to take up the constitutive gamble of comparative philosophy, we will find challenging new ways to change the rules of the philosophical game.
Despite what one might assume the title suggests, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* by Jiyuan Yu is an exploration of two different traditions of virtue ethics in their entirety, and takes a critical look at far more than the work of two thinkers. This is not to say that Confucius or Aristotle do not take center stage in the better part of the text’s comparisons, but rather, by drawing on a more complete cannon for each tradition, Yu provides a comprehensive picture of each tradition’s views, along with his own interpretations. This book is remarkable in its ability to so plainly outline similarities in traditions often painted as fundamentally different and at times even entirely incommensurate. Yu’s portrayal of notable similarities between Confucian and Aristotelian thought lends itself to an optimistic future of comparative philosophy as a whole and the possibility of a global philosophy in an already present common ground.

Yu strives to deviate from comparisons that make Chinese inquiry a derivative of Western thought. Instead, he borrows Aristotle’s concepts of “friend-as-mirror” and “saving the phenomena” to develop a more constructive comparative methodology (4). In adopting these practices, comparison is structured in the following way: the two traditions serve as mirrors for one another, making apparent things that are or are not present in each other, all the while helping to illuminate the phenomena (present or evident thing) or endoxa (reputable opinion) present in both (5). Essentially, in comparing two different traditions, rather than explicitly seeking out similarities, differences, or a winner, one must endeavor to understand how an individual informs the existence of another individual and what common denominators are present in both. In practice, this looks like aligning issues and thinking critically about what findings of similarity and difference mean. Yu’s distillation and juxtaposition of phenomena creates a platform for comparison that helps avoid combative language and projection.

Yu’s scope of comparison encompasses a great deal of thought, addressing several texts and ideas from both traditions. Primarily, Yu draws from Aristotle’s works, like the *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, and others, as well as Plato’s *Republic*, for his representation of Aristotelian virtue ethics, and from the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, *Great Learning*, and *Doctrine of the Mean* for Confucian thought. Through a close analysis of these texts, Yu deliberately lays out his reasoning for his interpretations and makes explicit his claims of similarity and difference therein. He does this by addressing issues thematically, focusing on a different aspect of Confucius and Aristotle’s shared or opposing virtue ethics in each chapter while making explicit their place in the larger comparison.
Mirrors starts with a comparison of the foundation of each tradition’s virtue ethic, primarily looking at eudaimonia and dao, the central conceptual goals of Aristotle and Confucius’ virtue ethics, respectively. The points established in this chapter serve as a foundation of sorts for the argumentation in the rest of the book. As Yu makes clear in this chapter, both thinkers find self-alignment with some implicit natural order the paramount concern of ethics. For eudaimonia, Yu finds the standard translation of “happiness” to be misleadingly simple. Eudaimonia represents living well and prospering in a way that is in line with achieving happiness through virtuous action. Similarly dao, or “the way,” implies an order set by Heaven that is the “ultimate guarantor of moral value and world order” (26-7). Both of these conceptions of an ideal human existence or path are based around ideas of virtue; for Aristotle the focus is aretē and for Confucius, de and ren (I will discuss the similarities of these concepts later). Yu posits that such striking similarity in the two virtue ethics’ foundational ideas—despite their different historical contexts—demonstrates a shared phenomena, or experience. Namely, that both thinkers concern themselves with the “whole lives” of individuals and finding what makes a person good (21).

Another resemblance, which Yu discusses in length in chapter two, is the way in which both traditions concern themselves with humanity and its link with virtue. Human nature has been a fiercely debated topic among Confucians, involving the differing viewpoints of Confucius, Mengzi, and Xunzi. However, Yu concerns himself primarily with Mengzi’s theory of human nature (xing), which he posits has a two-fold meaning. First, is the “root sense” of the word which describes that which is inborn, and second is the “special sense,” describing that which is characteristically human (58). Yu goes on to argue that this is similar both in structure and content to Aristotle’s idea of ergon. Translated as “function” for ease of use, ergon more precisely represents, for humans, “the essence of being human, or human primary substance” (59). Much like Confucian xing, Yu argues, ergon is a dualistic term encompassing both general and special uses. This resemblance is only made stronger in that the general and special usages of ergon, as Yu defines them, are nearly identical to those of xing. This comparison is made particularly poignant when Yu points out that this similar pursuit was brought on by the refutation of similar opposition: egoists and consequentialists. Both Mengzi and Aristotle had to defend their virtue ethics from newly pervading ideas regarding personal gain and profit. Therefore, this comparison illuminates how two traditions can resemble each other not only in their subject matter but in their contextual narrative as well, completely disavowing claims that traditions are intrinsically irreconcilable.

Perhaps the most uncanny overlap in Aristotle and Confucius’ philosophies is their discussion of virtue and the mean. Both philosophers choose to characterize their concept of virtue as “the mean” which they describe and structure in nearly identical ways. One instance of this is the presence of an archery metaphor in both philosophers’ discussion of the mean. Yu argues that by using archery as a vehicle for talking about the mean, both thinkers demonstrate how their ideas of virtue differ from simple moderation or finding a middle ground. For Aristotle and Confucius, finding and exercising the mean represents a two-fold endeavor of choosing something “in the middle of excess and deficiency,” but also the “right and appropriate” thing to do (84). Much like archery, choosing the virtuous action can go wrong in more ways than one: the arrow could go too far left or right, or high or low. Evaluating context and hitting the mark is a task that requires more than moderation between extremes, but an appropriate evaluation of
what needs to be done to do the right thing. Virtuous action has the end goal of hitting the mark of what is right. Indeed, that mark lies between multiple sets of extremes, but an archer (or a virtue ethicist) must understand the situation in order to successfully fulfill their goal. Yu argues that another key step that both thinkers take in regard to their conception of virtue is stating the interaction between inner and outer mean. While these things have slightly different implications in each tradition, reading them together helps clarify their emphasis on conditioning virtuous response rather than just moderation. From the *Doctrine of the Mean*, we can glean that the Confucian sense of *zhong* or an “inner state of feeling” is linked with *he*, translated as “harmony”, which describes an exercising of the inner mean in action (83). Similarly, for Aristotle, the development of character is integral to the proper manifestation of virtue in “passions and actions” (81). Both traditions also emphasize the practicing of inner virtue in order to “hit the mark” in one’s action. Finally, Yu claims the division of virtue into the three categories of social feeling, moral feelings, and moral wisdom is something built into both philosophies. Yu’s discussion of cross-cultural virtue ethics provides interpretations of Confucian and Aristotelian ethics that mesh incredibly well both structurally and conceptually.

In chapter four, Yu expounds upon the concept of conditioned response and disposition introduced in his discussion of virtue. Although grounded in different sets of belief, both of the *Mirror*’s titular thinkers believe in the repetition of virtuous action. The concept that “we are always on the road of cultivation and refinement” is something that resonates with both Confucius and Aristotle’s ethics (168). For Confucius, this means returning to *ren* through an observation of rites (*li*). Aristotle, although less concerned with tradition in a strict sense, values habitualizing virtuous behavior by way for social customs and repeated action. Yu explains that both authors give assent to the idea that “repeated good acts give rise to good character, whereas repeated bad acts give rise to bad character” (98). For these virtue ethicists, acting well needs to be practiced in action before it can become internalized and understood as virtue. Yu argues this stems, in part, from the influences of pleasure and pain, or liking and disliking certain stimuli, and the human tendency to be drawn to the action that brings pleasure rather than the virtuous one. Neither Confucius nor Aristotle believes this impulse to be an implicitly negative thing, but it can hinder virtuous behavior. The *Analects* reads, “a man who finds *ren* attractive cannot be surpassed” because part of acting virtuously is overcoming impulse, and one whose impulse is to act virtuously does not have to condition themselves to act well (103). For Confucius the primary social structure responsible for the development of ritualization and propriety is the family, while for Aristotle, it is the political system (though Confucius also holds politics as an important part of virtue and ritualization). Ultimately, both Confucius and Aristotle believe that humans are implicitly social beings that necessitate human interaction and interrelation in order to realize their full potential. Yu claims that it is in learning propriety and what virtuous action looks like, either through family-instilled values, or through norms and expectations set by government, and then repeating those lessons, that indicates the shared value of cultivation through repetition.

Yu explains that although both Confucius and Aristotle would likely disagree with the intellectualism of Socrates’ method and beliefs, they nonetheless maintain that rationality has a place in ethics. Conceptualization and discretion play a part as *phronesis* (practical wisdom) for Aristotle and *yi* (appropriateness) for Confucius. Both concepts are surrounded by a degree of ambiguity and contention, but there are still pertinent connections to be made on this front. Yu discusses these topics in great length in chapter five, which examines the third part of virtue:
ethical wisdom. Yu believes the similarity of these two ideas to lie in their motivation to describe how one goes about achieving their ethical aims. For both philosophers, these faculties have both inner and outer dynamics to them and are comprised of two connected parts. For Aristotle, ethical wisdom is made up of knowing and choosing the right thing, while for Confucius, it is yi (appropriateness) and zhi (wisdom). If virtue is “a disposition for knowing what to do and choosing to do it,” both contingent parts allow the individual to put that virtuous disposition into action (148). This, as Yu lays it out, represents the mechanism of action in either virtue ethic, providing a means by which disposition translates into good acts.

The last two chapters of Mirrors focus on the primary differences in Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Chapter six is concerned with the differing takes on the highest moral state of human beings. This is immediately followed by a discussion of Aristotle’s distinction between practical and contemplative not present in Confucian ethics. First, for Confucius, the highest level of moral attainment is self-completion or cheng, while for Aristotle it is contemplation. The way I understand this struggle is that Confucius believes that by attaining cheng and therefore sagehood, one has aligned themselves with dao to the furthest extent that a person can, whereas Aristotle believes that it is not enough to have this ability, but to fully actualize it, you must exercise it through ‘contemplation.’ Secondly, Aristotle develops a differentiated structure of virtue in which intellect is developed as a final step after the development of practical virtue. Confucius, conversely, advocates for self-actualization in order to develop one cohesive nature without any constituent parts. Although the book notes several other differences and unique aspects of each throughout, chapters six and seven contain the primary investigation of the difference Yu finds to be the most glaring.

Now, there are a number of things that Yu does amazingly well in this book, from painstaking analysis, to enlightening observation, to well-substantiated argumentation. For the most part, I am persuaded by the argument Yu builds over the course of the work. With that being said, I have a few minor qualms with some aspects of the book. I will begin my commentary with a discussion of Yu’s methodology. Following that, I will endeavor to engage with parts of the book’s content that I found to be particularly striking.

An especially commendable aspect of this work is the sheer breadth of its discussion. Yu’s comparison offers a broad scope in a couple senses. First, it does not focus on a singular issue that is similar or different between two traditions. Rather, he analyzes and discusses several different, complex issues in the frame of his larger ethical comparison. Yu writes, “the focus of our comparison, […] is on what each ethics actually says, that is, on the ideas and arguments in ethical texts of each side” (17). Yu successfully addresses a wide range of topics with clarity and purpose, all the while providing contending opinions without overcrowding his argument. Second, Yu draws from several different texts to substantiate his claims about both traditions, making his comparison more comprehensive. Yu initially “intended to just compare the NE and the Analects…but it quickly became clear that…it was less rewarding and interesting” (18). It was precisely by way of broadening the scope of his reading that Yu is able to tackle such a diverse list of subjects. However, I do feel that he utilized secondary texts (texts other than the Analects or the Nichomachean Ethics) more for the Confucian tradition, perhaps giving a more generalized interpretation of Confucian ethics than Aristotle’s. The size of Yu’s undertaking is
commendable, and his execution in tying together such topically diverse subjects makes for a unique exploration of the two traditions.

It is also important to note that interpretations of all of these texts and their ideas are areas of intense debate and discussion, and therefore could have been extrapolated much more than Yu chose to. Yu explains main areas of contention alongside his own interpretation and I think he does a good job of laying these things out comprehensively, but with brevity and precision. Taking on a project of this magnitude necessitates choosing between possibly excluding useful information and cluttering the necessary points with peripheral ideas. For example, Confucian debate regarding human nature is a greatly discussed subject and imperative to knowledge in any discourse on the matter, but could potentially take up a whole chapter. Instead, Yu lays out the different camps regarding human nature in Confucianism by stating the cases for Confucius and Xunzi all the while maintaining that the subject of our analysis would be Mengzi (54). In all, he covers a number of very contentious topics, each with a huge amount of writing done concerning them. Therefore, I would find it difficult to believe that anyone who’s engaged with these ethics in the past would have no qualms with any of Yu’s points, but that being said, I don’t think that detracts from the persuasion of his argument.

Alasdair MacIntyre claims that there exist “no shared standards and measures, external to both systems and neutral between them, to which appeal might be made to adjudicate between [Confucius and Aristotle’s] rival claims.” I think Yu’s use of the “friend-as-mirror” in his comparison does a good job of making explicit the intention behind the comparative work he intends to do, and, in some regards, refutes MacIntyre’s challenge, but falls short in others. In taking each philosopher to be an actor in the comparison, revealing strengths, weaknesses, similarities, and differences in the other, we move toward constructing a common truth and new questions that can be posed therein. Yu claims that “taking them as mirrors for each other leads us to reflect upon the traditional roots of both ethics, to examine their otherwise unexamined presuppositions, and to generate alternative perspectives to determine why each side proceeds in the way it does” (4). This approach, in large part, avoids language associated with what Matice called the combat metaphor, which often takes hold in comparative philosophy discussions inclining us to endeavor to choose a winner. In addition, Yu introduces his use of “friend as mirror” as an alternative to comparative approaches which use Western philosophy as a model, framework, or tool utilized to analyze non-western traditions. MacIntyre puts forth several arguments for incommensurabilities and relativisms, arguing that even in best-case scenario comparisons, “each will represent the beliefs of the other within its own discourse in abstraction from the relevant tradition and so in a way that ensures misunderstanding.” While I think Yu is certainly successful in questioning and analyzing both traditions without taking Western philosophy as a given, I’m not comfortable in saying that the use of Aristotle’s concept to compare Aristotelian and Confucian ideas is completely void of bias. In that sense, Yu’s methodology is not a completely neutral metric for comparison. However, I do not agree with MacIntyre that this invalidates the comparisons made using this methodology. Although I think

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12 MacIntyre 1989, 188.
that Yu does an exceptional job in avoiding issues of one-sidedness and generalization\textsuperscript{13}, it is important to recognize that this book is written from the perspective of Western discourse, and not perfectly removed from all tradition.

Regarding the arguments presented at the opening of the book’s analysis, I find that Yu starts strong with a clear and compelling case for the similarity between \textit{dao} and \textit{eudaimonia}. This comparison sets the tone for following arguments because it exemplifies how resonant the intentions the two virtue ethics are, while resting on different principles. In a few ways, the arguments Yu puts forward in his first chapter work like a literal foundation for a house: without it, the argument crumbles. Yu begins by demonstrating the finality of each thinker’s ideal. While \textit{dao} represents the way of things put into place by Heaven, \textit{eudaimonia} is the standard for morality because it represents living to full potential and happiness. Utilizing “friend as mirror,” Yu makes a persuasive argument for the similar intentions of the contextually different concepts. Despite contrasting origins, both represent actualization and happiness for individuals seeking enlightenment by way of this ideal. Yu’s discussion of virtue in this chapter is also a good example of how he frames his interpretation in order to make connections more apparent. Yu defines Confucian virtue (\textit{de} and \textit{ren}) as “what makes a person a person” and Aristotle’s idea of \textit{aretē} as “the state that makes a man good and that makes him do his own work well” (35). In framing virtue in this chapter as intrinsically tied to ideals of morality for both thinkers, Yu can give an account of how virtue is conceived in slightly different ways, but applied in similar contexts for similar purpose.

Later in the first chapter, Yu substitutes Aristotle for Socrates in order to compare the establishment of ethics in each tradition. While this line of inquiry yields a number of fascinating points, the inclusion of Socrates makes for a somewhat muddled portrait of the comparative origins of the two traditions. This is because Socrates is painted as the progenitor of Western ethics and then set as the antithesis for both Confucius and Aristotle’s virtue ethics as an over-intellectualizing, tradition-loathing thinker without a great deal of consideration for the happiness of the individual. Yu believes that both traditions of ethics were initiated from some iteration of divine command. With that being said, both Socrates and Confucius never claim to be doing philosophy because they were told to do so by God or Heaven, but out of a “self-conceived obligation rather than a direct prescription” (39). Aristotle makes no such claims about his inspiration for pursuing ethics, and in many regards stands as a reevaluation of Socratic ethics. In fact, there are many “aspects in which Aristotle and Confucius share approaches that are similar in that they differ from Socrates” (47). Is this hundred and eighty degree turn in Socrates’ involvement in Yu’s comparison necessarily problematic? Can we use a thinker as both the founder and foil of an ethic in the same comparison? Although I think that the inclusions of Socrates and the origin of Western ethics are fascinating, I cannot tell if it advances Yu’s similarity thesis or detracts from it. Perhaps this is the downside of the broad range of Yu’s project: more fruitful inquiry but with messier results.

In my opinion, one of the strongest arguments for similarity in the book was the juxtaposition of virtue and the archery metaphor as tangential proof for the similar implications

\textsuperscript{13} Connolly explains that one-sidedness is the assimilation of our own tradition’s ideas into another, while generalization is the use of “broad characterization” in describing another culture and its philosophy. Connolly 2015, 105 and 125.
of both philosophies. This is because it substantiates a number of Yu’s claims while providing an instance of shared imagery between the two philosophies. To start, archery is an apt representation of using inner mean to hit the outer mean in your actions. As an archer takes aim and adjusts to try and meet the right trajectory, he or she is then transferring the dispositional inner mean to carry out the proper action, and hit the target. It may be in this sense that a good person is still characterized by the idiomatic concept of ‘straight shooter;’ although an individual may not always hit the mark, they are honest and forthright in their actions and therefore ‘shoot straight.’ Next, this metaphor shows the dualistic conception of the mean as, in part, existing between extremes, and also as doing what is right. An archer may be simply measuring the middle of all directional extremes or accounting for the wind speed of an oncoming tornado; whatever the case, the objective remains to hit the target. Finally, archery exemplifies the conditioning to get proper response. It requires several years of shooting arrows before one can consistently hit the mark. In so many ways, the archery example provides a vehicle for the communication of this cross-cultural virtue ethic. In using an example that draws from a culturally pertinent image for both traditions, that both thinkers found to be an adequate representation, Yu takes the convenient overlap of shared example and demonstrates how telling that detail is of shared implications.

Yu takes what could be misperceived as a superficial trait that both thinkers share, and illuminates how the textual discussion of virtue shows how expressly central archery is to both Aristotle and Confucius. Yu’s argument goes beyond a simple conceptual comparison of how each deals with the metaphor, but dissects the origins and implications of archery imagery, the etymology of words surrounding the discussion of the mean, and the deconstructed parts of the mean. Yu establishes early on that both Confucius and Aristotle were moving away from a morality reserved for upper classes, and this resurfaces in his examination of archery as an image tied to both nobility and masculinity in both cultures (90). Next, Yu takes care to keep in mind the imagery evoked by the word choice in both philosophies. For instance, “Aristotle repeatedly uses the expression ‘hitting the mean.’ The word ‘hitting’ (stochastikē, from the verb, stochazesthai, to aim or to shoot at) strongly suggests that the craft of archery is the model for Aristotle in establishing the doctrine of the mean” (86). Similarly, “in Chinese, fa is directly related to ‘shooting,’ and to the verb zhong (to hit the target). To praise an excellent archer, one says bai fa bai zhong (literally, shooting a hundred arrows and hitting the mark a hundred times)” (85). Central concepts such as “hitting the mean” and zhong illuminate the inseparable connection between archery and virtue ethics (or at the very least conceptions of the mean). In laying out how the terminology of both thinkers’ virtue ethical systems evokes images of archery, Yu can demonstrate how the similar structure of both virtue ethics was intentional.

Finally, I feel that this book does a great job of making a case for similarities between Confucius and Aristotle while still reaffirming their unique qualities. In addition to this, I think Yu takes a critical look at what the fundamental differences between the two philosophies are. And although I think that the final two chapters are thought provoking, I don’t think that the differences are nearly as hard hitting as the similarities. The main two differences Yu puts forward in the final chapters are both distinctions that Aristotle makes and Confucius does not. The distinctions put forward seem to me to be more contrasting in emphasis than in content, since I do not think that Confucius would particularly disagree with the claim that the enlightened person should carry out virtuous action and contemplation or that virtue contains
both practical and contemplative elements. Aristotle believes that “a life of contemplation is primary happiness, whereas a life of practical virtue is secondary” (169). This stems from his separation of theoretical and practical, the second main difference between the two. Meanwhile, Confucius posits that “the ultimate realization of original good human nature…is called cheng” which Yu claims is “more a counterpart of practical virtue” (169). Now, although cheng is certainly based on the culmination of self-actualization through development of ren, I would argue that there is also a theoretical aspect built into the Confucian pursuit of sagehood. The Mengzi states, “The function of the heart is to reflect. If it reflects, then it…will get it. This is how to become a great person.”\(^{14}\) I would argue that the interest in developing the “great parts” of the individual through reflection is akin to the ongoing rational act of contemplation that Yu claims is unique to Aristotle. Although contemplation is far and away more important to Aristotle’s virtue ethics, it would seem that Confucian ethics is not entirely missing a theoretical side to virtue. It seems to me as though the difference lies more so in Aristotle’s emphasis on the importance of Contemplation, rather than Aristotle’s philosophy containing an idea that Confucian’ does not.

In summation, The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue is a triumph of constructive comparative philosophy, in that it endeavors to create mutual benefit rather than a winner. Yu’s argument is diligently substantiated and painstakingly thought out. This work stands to provide a jumping-off point for future studies of cross-cultural ethics and a refutation of the incommensurability of different traditions. Yu does not shy away from the controversy surrounding either of the thinkers, and takes care to give his perspective while acknowledging the nuances at play, creating a compelling argument for similarity. In my opinion, Yu has accomplished the impressive task of organizing and discussing the foundations, frameworks, concepts, and arguments of the works of two intensely debated thinkers in such a way that, not only do their ideas inform one another and raise new questions, but that one may find themselves wondering why such an apparent connection had not already been made.

\(^{14}\) Mengzi 6A15; see Mengzi 2008, 156.
Understanding a New Type of Religion


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Comparative philosophy, the comparison of Eastern and Western philosophies, is underutilized as a tool to build upon previous understandings and construct new ways of understanding and relating to the world. However, in his book *Liberation as Affirmation: The Religiosity of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche*, Ge Ling Shang does just this. Through a comparison of Friedrich Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, Shang identifies their common goal to deconstruct metaphysical understandings of morality and truth, both of which they view as negative, harmful, and life-denying. Instead, both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche advocate for freedom from human constructed systems and the affirmation of life and the natural world, which Shang believes represents what he calls “religiosity.” Religiosity, as Shang understands it, is a religious feeling or sentiment characterized by a ‘religiously’ profound and passionate concern for things in life that are believed to be particularly meaningful, sacred, and sublime” (1). Shang’s project has two goals. The first is to show how Zhuangzi and Nietzsche have very similar perspectives about the insufficiency of metaphysical understanding and subsequent constructions of valuation based upon human liberation and affirmation of life. The second is to show how this common understanding of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi builds and improves upon the dominant philosophical discourses prevalent in China and the West.

Shang’s project is ultimately quite persuasive and successful in its goals, yet as with most works of comparative philosophy, it is challenged by many issues. One if the potential problems is whether or not it is possible to compare two works when they are born out of such vastly different cultural and historical contexts, such as those of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi. It is possible that the contexts in which Nietzsche and Zhuangzi developed their works makes their philosophies incommensurable. Furthermore, even if it is possible to compare such different traditions, the application of Eastern concepts to solve issues of the West is an unfair appropriation of Eastern thought, which is a continuum of colonialism’s patterns of exploitation of Eastern traditions. Conversely, applying Western values to the East is reminiscent of colonialism forcing Western ideas, traditions, and values upon the colonized East. Another possible challenge is the notion that Shang’s concept of religiosity is not a philosophical concept, but a religious concept. This could remove his project entirely from philosophy. Additionally, it could be said that Shang’s reading of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi is a vast misinterpretation of both authors. In the following, I will evaluate Shang’s project, concluding that it is both successful in avoiding many of the issues the haunt comparative philosophy and productively presents a new understanding of the world that could be beneficial in both Eastern and Western contexts.
Shang’s comparative project is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to his goal and methodology. The second and third chapters provide detailed explanations of Zhuangzi’s and Nietzsche’s respective deconstructions of the metaphysical values held in their societies and constructions of new sets of values that are affirming and liberating. The third chapter compares the similarities and differences of Zhuangzi’s and Nietzsche’s approaches to deconstructing and reconstructing value systems. The final chapter discusses how the common goal of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche to deconstruct metaphysical values in favor of religiosity can both help to change the misconstrued reputations the philosophers have in the West and China and build upon and improve common understandings of philosophical morality and valuation.

This following section will contain an explication of Shang’s understanding of Zhuangzi and will not speak to the accuracy or value of his interpretation. The concept of Dao, or “the path, road, or way by which people can walk” is a prevalent idea in Chinese traditions (11). Dao is supposed to provide people with guidance leading in the proper direction, informing people how they should behave and what they should value. Understanding Dao was the ultimate goal. However, Dao has “a hundred ideas” about it and different schools of thought constantly transformed their understanding of Dao (15). However, Dao as it transformed, “began to refer to the ultimate reality, cosmological origin or universal principle” (13). Laozi, too, perceived Dao as, “as the route of ten-thousand-things” and as a universal truth, continuing the metaphysical conception of Dao. (15). For Zhuangzi, however, Dao could not be a metaphysical truth and constructions of Dao as such are utterly restrained by the limitations of human knowledge, which fail to accurately describe Dao. For Laozi, Dao is wu (nothingness or non-being), yet for Zhuangzi, Dao cannot exist in this way as, “The Dao as a metaphysical reality and cosmological origin is actually No-thing, which means no Dao as such exists” (19). In other words, if wu or nothing is the real origin of the world, the world as it is cannot exist and is denied; it is a negation of Dao. According to Shang, “To be attached or obsessed by wu, Zhuangzi has pointed out, would obstruct one’s view to see the world as a whole and block the Way for one to attain enlightenment” (21). Zhuangzi, therefore, conceived of wuwu, which is nonbeing of nonbeing and has “completely overcome the duality between thing and No-thing, or Being and Non-being, it is both you and wu, or neither you nor wu, it is a real affirmation of this existing world through negation of negation” (20). In other words, by understanding the non-being of non-being, we negate the denial of the world, but also negate such a negation. In this way, one is able to understand the oneness of all.

For Zhuangzi, the idea of oneness is essential to dao. However, by oneness, it is not meant that everybody is exactly the same. Rather one must have a mind of yi, meaning understanding, “the differences between individuals are not dissolved into some grand and abstracted universal, but are distinguished or characterized by the Oneness of their togetherness” (25). Understanding that everything in the same in that it is all different, does not mean identifying one opinion of things (wulun) as superior to another. Rather, one must get past such dualisms, simply “equalizing or identifying opinions on things,” or qi wulun, without passing judgment. Zhuangzi’s use of qi wulun is best described by Shang in the following,
metaphysical opinions in the first place and thus help them to see the equal (qi) nature of different of opinions so that entrapment within the web of these opinions can be avoided. (31)

For Zhuangzi, there is no right and no wrong. There are only different perspectives and a person living according to Zhuangzi’s conception of Dao, “sees things as they are yet never fixes itself in judging which is right and wrong” (35). Allowing the recognition of differences and understanding the sources of such different opinions on things, for Zhuangzi is the only way to understand true knowledge and its limitations. Conceptions of universal knowledge, bred from metaphysical understandings and confined within human language, are fixed upon certain ideas as being universally right, failing to understand the origin of such ideas. This type of knowledge fails to see how everything is based entirely off of the perspective and the limitations of the person who conceived of it. For Zhuangzi, true knowledge is the recognition that there is no ultimate and universally true knowledge. Understanding the limitations of commonly understood knowledge has the ability to free us from, “the melancholy of an alienated life, which is controlled and disturbed by human knowledge” (30). To entirely understand true knowledge, one must know the limitations of human knowledge and commit to understanding that everything is perspectival, meaning there is no ultimate or universal truth that one can know at all.

Another issue of human knowledge, for Zhuangzi, is its confinement within the realms of human language. Language is, “what constructs and fixes our thinking so that it opens a gap between man and nature and suppresses our spontaneity and freedom” (37). Language is only able to label and categorize things or ideas that are understood within the limitations of human knowledge. Furthermore, as language’s primary function is to “name, signify, and conceptualize things, language cannot help dividing undifferentiated nature into signifiers, names, and categories” (38). This automatic differentiation into hierarchical categories prevents a person from understanding the origins of language’s fixed nature, i.e., human conception.

Due to the limitations of language, Zhuangzi wishes to find a way of deconstructing our language and “speak without language” (39). He finds three primary methods of doing so: allegory (yuyan), double words (chongyan), and goblet words (zhiyan) (39). Through the use of allegory, one can avoid saying anything directly, allowing statements to be inconclusive and non-judgmental (39). Double words are words with multiple meanings, which reveal the paradox and duality of human language (41). The most important, however, according to Shan, are goblet words, which are not fixed, but come about spontaneously, and are free from distinctions of right and wrong (41).15 Through using Zhuangzi’s speaking without language, one is able to avoid the issues related to human conceived language and free ourselves from its restrictions. According to Shang, “In the performance of such music of heaven, all human prejudices and anxieties that have stemmed from languages and senseless debates on metaphysics, truth, and knowledge have ceased: we return to our home of nature” (46). Through our freedom from language and our understanding that we can know nothing, we are finally able to understand the basic issues and alienating nature of our metaphysical morality that have been formed by such restricted language and knowledge.

15 Goblet words are words with no fixed meaning. In Shang’s words they are, “words that can never be filled and that overflowed with their ever-multiplying and transfiguring sense” (107).
Morality, as constructed by metaphysically based human knowledge and restrictive language, is entirely misleading. While representing itself as universal truth, applicable to all, it “works against our spontaneity and instinct of living with nature” (46). Morality, in fact, cannot be universal, but must be spontaneous and constantly transforming and developing. For Zhuangzi, instead of following commonly accepted metaphysical morality, a person should accept wu wei or nondoing (45). A person who does such is a person of de chong fu (51). Living in this manner of non-doing, spontaneity, acceptance, and affirmation of all life is the only way to achieve xiaoyaoyou, which according to Shang is, “a spiritual state of freedom, liberation, and affirmation” (55). Achieving xiaoyaoyou and living in a state of wudai (independence or nonduality), meaning “nondependence or nonduality of one’s mind,” is the ultimate construction of a new system of morality and valuation, which frees a person from her alienation, independent from the restraints of metaphysical world and allows her to live in harmony with the spontaneous, constantly transformative natural world (55).

Nietzsche, while his methodology differs from Zhuangzi’s, had the same mission to deconstruct what he thought of as the alienating system of metaphysical morality and knowledge, in favor of a system of affirmation of natural human life, liberated from the constraints of metaphysics. Nietzsche asserts that our current system of morality is not as it always has been and does not represent the true nature of the world. Rather, it originates from something outside this world and, consequently, values characteristics associated with the metaphysical world over those of the natural spontaneous world. Shang writes,

Everything this tradition devalues and resents belongs to the real world of life and those it values the highest must have another, peculiar origin—they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the ‘thing-in-itself.’ (63)

The morality that devalues the characteristics of the natural world, in other words, cannot be truly derived from that natural world. Rather they must come from a tradition based upon metaphysical perceptions of something outside the world, namely, God.

Not only is this form of morality not natural to our world, it is also nihilistic and denies the true nature of this world. Shang claims, paraphrasing Nietzsche, metaphysical understanding, “renounces this world and this life as something unbearable and keeps constructing another world and another life for some ultimate redemption” (72). This understanding creates a hierarchical dualism between the natural, spontaneous world and the universal, metaphysical world. Metaphysics creates a “fictitious world based on its hatred and renunciation of this world,” thus denying the value of our natural selves (74). Not only is a metaphysical understanding harmful, but it is also false and based upon false human notions of true knowledge. According to Shang, for Nietzsche, there can be no universal truth; rather, “there are only perspectives mediated by our wills, affects, sensations, beliefs, and physical bodies which consist of our ‘interpreting forces’” (77). Human knowledge cannot be universal because it is mediated through humans and confined within language. For Nietzsche, language is entirely

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16 Xiao is translated as “nondiscrimination or non attachment,” yao is translated is an “open and vacant mind,” and you is “the way one exists and moves” (53).
inadequate because we place things into static categories of names, which cannot begin to capture their transformative, spontaneous nature that humans do not fully understand.

Therefore, for Nietzsche, we must find a way of overcoming this understanding of true knowledge and morality based off of false metaphysical beliefs, in favor of an acceptance of the true world and everything’s “will to power” (86). In order to do this, one must accept the “world of appearances,” meaning, “the world is what appears and is appearing without anything behind it, without a transcendental Being beyond it. Everything simply appears and relates to everything else” (86). The acceptance of this world as the only real world means understanding its constantly changing dynamics and interpreting and reinterpreting our values and relations to the world (92). The person who is constantly overcoming values and human morality is what Nietzsche calls the Übermensch (over-man). The Übermensch, “has overcome and will keep overcoming himself or herself as human in the customary manner” and understands the true value of life, constantly affirming life with a “sacred Yes” (94). Being and Übermensch is a never ending process of overcoming and transformation, but, for Nietzsche, is the ultimate way to liberate oneself from the constraints of metaphysical understandings and affirm life.

Clearly, Zhuangzi and Nietzsche have similar projects in many ways, but they do have many differences in conceptions and methodologies, a Shang explores in Chapter 4. They both understand that common language is inadequate, as it is invented, “by human consciousness and human appropriation” (104). However, while for Nietzsche, we name things we cannot even begin to understand, for Zhuangzi, the word and what it is describing can never accurately coincide (105). However, one of the largest differences is their treatment of truth and knowledge. For Zhuangzi, there can be no ultimate truth, because every thing is based upon perspective. Therefore, it is best to simply accept you can know nothing at all. For Nietzsche, however, this is insufficient. He claims there is truth and it lies in the world of appearance, not the human constructed metaphysical understanding. As Shang puts it, if we, “reverse the truth back to the real world of appearance,” we can, “recover original human nature such as instinct affect the body and sexuality, which have been negated under the names of truth, knowledge, and God” (112). However, they do both see fundamental issues with metaphysics and human conception of truth, knowledge, and language.

Their conceptions of how we arrived at our inaccurate moral system are very different. However, they are both critiquing the commonly accepted ideas of their day. For Nietzsche, this was Judeo-Christian belief and for Zhuangzi this was Confucian conceptions of ren and yi (114). Moreover, their ideas about how to move past the current systems of morality and valuation are very different. While Zhuangzi was content to live in harmony with all, understanding the perspective of all morals and living in accordance with the present, Nietzsche sought to radically overcome traditional morality. According to Shang, “Nietzsche would likely have accused Zhuangzi of being passive and nihilistic” for refusing to continuously overcome human created systems of valuation (117).

Additionally, Zhuangzi’s and Nietzsche’s ideas of “oneness” are very different. While both of them see a natural unity in the world, which is denied by metaphysical understandings, they emphasize different things. While, “Zhuangzi stresses more the Oneness of differences and the harmony of chaos,” “Nietzsche stresses more the differences of Oneness and the chaos of
harmony” (135). However, while they do maintain very different conceptions and emphases, their goals are ultimately the same and, “the ultimate concern […] is to liberate humans from the human-all-too-human boundaries of their freedom through various ways of overcoming and cultivation” (131). While Zhuangzi may focus more upon harmony and disengagement and Nietzsche upon overcoming and power, they both represent the ultimate liberation from the confinements and limitations of metaphysical understandings, in favor of the affirmation of life.

Shang concludes his book by reflecting upon how his reading of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche as having common goals of religiosity can contribute to postmodernism and modern understandings of philosophy in China. Shang claims that both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche have been vastly misunderstood and misrepresented in both the West and China. Zhuangzi is frequently seen as a mystic, skeptic, or metaphysician and Nietzsche is seen as a nihilistic and a pragmatist. However, Nietzsche’s construction of a new set of morality is frequently ignored in favor of his deconstruction and criticism of the metaphysical system, making it appear that he is simply nihilistic. Furthermore, according to Shang, “Zhuangzi could have been the first ‘deconstructionist’ in terms of his challenge to metaphysics, language, knowledge, and morality” (140). Zhuangzi’s work, he argues, is in line with many postmodernists and deconstructionists. However, he argues that Derrida is unable to free himself from language, unlike Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, saying, “Nietzsche and Zhuangzi expanded their critique of language, which has been constructing, repressing, and alienating human life” (144). Furthermore, Shang argues that postmodernism is ultimately nihilistic, denying the current system without producing a new one. Shang says of postmodern thinking, “It lacks a resolution, its rejection of any solution to interpretive problems, makes postmodern thinking artificially invincible and inapplicable. It never takes a stance or position of its own that would leave it open to criticism” (145). Due to postmodernism’s inapplicability, the religiosity and affirmation of life suggested by Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, who both did similar work to the deconstructionists and postmodernists, builds upon postmodernism and provides a solution to postmodernism’s major flaw.

Similarly, modern Chinese thinkers misrepresented Nietzsche and Zhuangzi in a similar way. According to Shang, “Having so long struggled with either colonial oppression or communist dictatorship in the last century, Chinese intellectuals have focused exclusively on how to surmount the political and economic crisis even in the field of philosophy” (137). Due to this, what Shang calls waves of “Nietzsche cults” have grown in China, attempting to use Nietzsche’s philosophy as a method of overcoming their current situation (147), Shang shows that, “Nietzsche’s project is beyond any political intention of destruction or reconstruction of an existing system. His attempt is to deliver the human mind out of the hegemony of any ideological or metaphysical tradition, which favors ‘the other world’ and denies our life on Earth” (153). Thus, by providing a new way of understanding Nietzsche, Shang hopes to provide China with a new way of reevaluating their system of morality and suggests valuation through a system of religiosity.

Ultimately, Shang’s reading and comparison of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi and their shared project of religiosity is extremely effective in its goals. First, Shang’s reading reveals how the common conceptions and interpretations of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi as nihilistic, skeptical, mystics, etc. entirely fails to do justice to their entire projects, which were ultimately creating new ways of relating to the world and creating values and morality. By reinterpreting Nietzsche.
and Zhuangzi as having extremely similar projects, both of which begin with a deconstruction of metaphysical systems of valuation and morality and end with a new form of morality and valuation through religiosity and the affirmation of life, Shang emphasizes their constructive projects and their criticism of metaphysical values.

Moreover, Shang’s project manages to indicate how the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche caused them to be disregarded. This caused both the postmodernists of the West and the “Nietzsche cults” of the East to fail to reach as far as they could go. Both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche have very similar projects to the postmodernist project of deconstructionism. Shang is able to display how insufficient postmodernism is. Postmodernism, as Shang indicates is “invincible” and “inapplicable,” unable to be put into practical use because it never moves beyond deconstruction (145). In fact, it does not even reach the full lengths of deconstruction, as it remains entrenched in language. By showing, however, how both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi are able to move beyond language and construct a new way of relating to the world through their religiosity and affirmation, Shang reveals both how much these two neglected and misrepresented philosophers can contribute to modern philosophy and how entirely inadequate postmodernism is, particularly as it did not reach as far as two philosophers who died long, before its advent.

Shang’s comparison seems particularly useful when it comes to modern China. Shang, a self-described “Chinese intellectual living in China in the 1980s,” identifies significant usefulness in both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche’s application in modern China (1). By comparing Zhuangzi, who is frequently seen as a mystic and a skeptic in China, not worth much intellectual thought, with Nietzsche, who has been vastly utilized in China and is seen as a source of strength and truth, Shang is able to provide Chinese intellectuals with a point of view they either may not have understood from either Zhuangzi or Nietzsche. Furthermore, by associating Zhuangzi with Nietzsche, Shang makes a more direct appeal to Chinese intellectuals who may be more convinced by a thorough reading of Nietzsche than of Zhuangzi, who they view as a mystic and a skeptic.

However, as with all works of comparative philosophy, there are many challenges as to whether or not it is sufficient and accurate in its evaluation of two philosophies with such different cultural and historical contexts. Frequently, comparative works face the claim of incommensurability, meaning that it is completely impossible to compare such traditions from such entirely different contexts. There are three primary types of incommensurability that Shang’s project is at risk of: linguistic incommensurability, evaluative incommensurability, and foundational incommensurability. Linguistic incommensurability is the idea that, “philosophical traditions from different cultures depend on distinctive languages that cannot be translated into another.”17 This is particularly true for a comparison between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, neither of whom originally wrote in English. Shang utilizes many Chinese and German words. Occasionally, he leaves these words in their original language, e.g., Übermensch, ressentiment, dao, wuwu, xiaoyaoyou, wuzhi, ziran, etc., seemingly unable to translate them directly into English. Instead, Shang elaborates upon their definitions in order to properly describe what he believes Nietzsche and Zhuangzi meant by them. It is still possible that his descriptions of the words are insufficient. However, by leaving non-English words in that he feels unable to directly

17 Connolly 2015, 72.
translate and explaining them further, he makes it clear that he is being cautious in his interpretation and translation. In his caution, he is able to avoid many of the challenges comparative philosophers face about linguistic incommensurability.

Additionally, even if it is possible to move beyond claims of linguistic incommensurability, it is possible that Shang is wildly misinterpreting Zhuangzi and Nietzsche. He admits that his reading is outside of the common perceptions of both authors, which view Zhuangzi as a mystic and a skeptic and Nietzsche as a nihilist and pragmatist. His entire project is utterly dependent upon his own reading. However, Shang elaborates extensively and quotes heavily from both authors’ texts. His claims are all well-supported with textual evidence. Additionally, he spends an entire chapter explaining both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s projects, before attempting to show the ways they are different. Moreover, he does not claim the authors are entirely similar, but is able to find small differences through close interpretation of the text. This helps to combat claims about vast misinterpretations.

The second type of incommensurability is evaluative incommensurability, which is the claim that, “there are no rational grounds for deciding whether or not a view from one tradition is superior to another.” However, Shang explicitly does not claim either tradition is superior to the other. Rather, he simply shows the vast similarities of two philosophers who lived in very different cultural and historical contexts and have been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misrepresented in modern understanding. Shang does not promote either philosophy individually. Instead, he promotes what he sees as their shared religiosity, affirmation of life, and freedom of the constraints of human-constructed metaphysical values.

However, the strongest claim of incommensurability against Shang’s work is that of foundational incommensurability, meaning, “the foundations that traditions use to make sense of the world around them are so different from one another that members of these traditions cannot understand one another.” This is particularly difficult for Shang’s work, as he is not only comparing two different cultural and historical contexts, meaning that of Zhuangzi and of Nietzsche, but he is also attempting to apply their understanding of them to discussions contextualized in the modern East and West. Clearly, the four primary contexts drawn from in Shang’s work are vastly different. Furthermore, one defense utilized against claims of foundational incommensurability is to understand that we come from foundationally different contexts and attempt to understand why that is. According to Connolly, “If we are prepare to see other cultures’ philosophies as working from different absolute presuppositions than our own, then we are not only less likely to misunderstand them, but also more liable to gain something new ourselves.”

18 Connolly 2015, 72.
19 Connolly 2015, 72.
vastly different contexts, seems to indicate that there is even more universal truth in their project and their understandings of the flaws in this world. As stated by Shang,

One could easily assert that Zhuangzi and Nietzsche have little in common: the will to power versus *wuwei*; creativity versus *ziran*; becoming versus *wu* and Dao; difference versus Oneness and identity; chaos versus harmony; appropriation versus adaptation; anthropological versus naturalistic perspectives; and so on. Some might see these superficial oppositions as reflective of so-called Western and Chinese cultures: dynamic versus obsolete; creative versus conservative; aggressive versus retrospective; commanding versus obedient; individualistic versus collectivist. [...] After all, both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche proposed new perspectives on the world and nature in which human beings can ultimately enjoy living in a spontaneous, creative, and healthy life world. (125)

Ultimately, I am in agreement with Shang: the cultural context seems unnecessary when their conclusions are extremely similar. Moreover, if one fears cross cultural comparisons, there is no chance for them to ever be successful. Shang engages with this issue, stating, “Only engagement in comparative thought can confront these difficulties, not a refusal to engage,” and Shang engages successfully (4).

Once we move beyond issues of the inability to compare and potential for misinterpretation, there are frequently objections to what is seen as the continuation of colonialistic patterns. These patterns include Western colonizers exploiting Eastern colonies, appropriating traditions and applying them to Western cultures, while also forcibly transmitting their own Western ideals, values, and traditions onto the Eastern world. Therefore, Shang could be accused of crossing the colonizing lines by applying Western ideas to the East and vice versa. It may be said that since Shang is applying Eastern and Western traditions equally to each other, it is not crossing those lines, or at least not doing so in a problematic, “one-sided” way. However, Shang is not transmitting explicitly Western ideals to the East or explicitly Eastern concepts to the West. Rather, he is revealing the ideals that these philosophers from the East and West commonly understood to be true. He is merely identifying these common features and promoting them as a possible solution to the distinct issues of the East and West. Comparative philosophy, rather than continuing colonial oppression can be a method to move beyond colonialism by showing the commonalities, while also recognizing the differences. As Shang says, “Two cultures can only hope for mutual understanding through an attempt to communicate, and if the process of communication is pronounced impossible before it begins, the two individual cultures will seem irrevocably alienated from one another” (5). It is only through communication and mutual understanding that we can move beyond colonialistic attitudes and hierarchies.

Finally, it could be raised that Shang’s work in not a work of philosophy at all. Rather than dealing with a pure search to understand the world, it may be considered a work of religion, as the ultimate finding of the book is Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s mutual religiosity. However, religion is becoming a greater and greater part of philosophical studies and vice versa. Referring

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21 Connolly 2015, 106.
to Tyler Roberts, Shang argues that religion has broadened to include many fields of study outside of theistic or metaphysical pursuits, stating,

Religion, according to Roberts, is imagined and reimagined in broader sense as the cultural complexes within and around which it transforms. In other words, the meaning of religion is no longer confined to the relationship between God and human beings or specific forms of rituals and beliefs. It has come over centuries to include art, philosophy, and cultural institutions with which a certain type of existence, life and the world. (155)

This new form of religion is not what is commonly understood, and seems more in line with philosophical pursuits of understanding exactly how one should naturally relate to the world. This does seem to be a philosophical pursuit, but if not, does it really matter? According to Carine Defoort, two philosophies may have entirely different methodologies and "forms of reasoning," but the ultimate goal remains the same--- to "strive for the ideal of objectivity or open-mindedness."22 For Defoort, all that matters is that the work can provide or conceive of, "an entirely new perspective."23 For both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, the goal remains the same—to liberate people from the bounds of metaphysical valuation and knowledge, in favor of the affirmation of life.

Ultimately, Shang’s book Liberation as Affirmation: The Religiosity of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche is successful in indicating the commonalities of both Nietzsche’s and Zhuangzi’s philosophies. Both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi share a common critique of their culture’s metaphysical understandings of knowledge, language, and morality. In response to this common problem, both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi deconstruct these metaphysical understandings, liberating humans from its restrictions and fixed nature. In place of metaphysical understanding, both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche advocate for a new understanding of our world, an understanding which affirms life and its constantly changing, spontaneous nature. While, they do maintain differences in their methodologies, Shang is successful in revealing their shared religiosity and positing it as a solution to common issues in the modern West and China. While there are some potential issues, Shang is able to overcome these and produce an entirely new understanding of Zhuangzi’s and Nietzsche’s shared religiosity.

22 Defoort 2001, 403.
23 Defoort 2001, 403.
Work Hard, Study Hard, Practice Hard: The Possibility for Virtue Ethics Through Chastened Intellectualism


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This essay examines Aaron Stalnaker’s concepts of “global neighborliness,” “bridge concepts,” and “chastened intellectualism” in *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine*. The basis for comparison between Xunzi and Augustine is that they both hold negative views of human nature. While Stalnaker’s work in comparative philosophy in search of moral virtue is diligent and well reasoned, I argue that virtue ethics needs more substantial and tangible methods than simply chastened intellectualism. Stalnaker opens one room of possibility, but does not move past this realm.

Summary

In *Overcoming Our Evil*, Aaron Stalnaker engages in comparative philosophy of Xunzi and Augustine through the bridge concepts (his coined term): human nature, person, spiritual exercises, and the will. Bridge concepts “are general ideas, which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases” (17). This concept works best with near-equivalent terms from each author, but it is not necessary. A bridge concept provides an anchor for comparison and preserves each author’s original language. Thus, it focuses the attention on particular ideas and how they fit into larger visions, “thereby allowing more nuanced comparisons of seemingly similar ideas across traditions” (18).

The first two chapters ground Stalnaker’s work, while the subsequent chapters undertake comparisons between Augustine and Xunzi. The methodology in the subsequent chapters is simple: one chapter on two bridge concepts for Xunzi, one chapter on two bridge concepts for Augustine, then one chapter for the comparison. Stalnaker repeats his structure once more then ends with a concluding chapter. I will follow Stalnaker’s structural lead and summarize each chapter in his order.

This book wishes to explore comparative ethics in a way that “moves beyond the simplistic tradition/modernity dichotomy,” by addressing the “striking power of...religious regimes of spiritual exercises to change and form people into ethical agents” (4). Stalnaker believes that by focusing the attention to the work of two people, pinpointing one area to explore, and giving the proper historical context, he can avoid many of the potential obstacles to
successful comparative work, like generalization and one-sidedness. He explains the main reason he investigates Xunzi and Augustine is that they share the belief in “humanity’s propensities to do evil” (19). In the next chapter, Stalnaker provides in-depth background on both Augustine and Xunzi. Born in 310 BCE in China, Xunzi’s childhood history is not detailed, but Stalnaker states that from a young age, Xunzi was precocious and wildly curious (28). Augustine was born in 354 CE, and he struggled financially to secure enough money to attend school. In the end, both theorists attended additional schooling where they honed their concepts and ideas. Stalnaker then describes his four main bridge concepts in broad strokes.

The third chapter deals with Xunzi’s understanding of human nature and the person. Stalnaker reads Xunzi’s understanding of human nature through his writing on xing (性), that which is “innate” to humans. Xing (性) does not exhaust the human capabilities because it leaves out xin (心), which is the “heart/mind” or “the lord of the body, and the ruler of the numinous clarity” (59, 73). The heart/mind issues commands but does not receive any (73). Xunzi regards our xing (性) as inherently bad; at the core, we are innately selfish (59). Every person craves li (利), “profit” or “benefit” (59). He argues that even brothers, given the proper circumstances, “will fight and rob each other, if they acted spontaneously, on the basis of their innate impulses alone” (59). Xunzi writes that the selfishness is a characteristic of an uncultivated “petty person” that acts instinctually like eating when hungry and sleeping when tired (59). But these desires are not inherently harmful or immoral. It is only when they are followed without restraint that desires become potentially destructive (63).

On the formation of a person, Xunzi believes that unless the pursuit of a desire leads to foreseeable harm, the individual will not veer from following their attraction. Since the heart/mind plays a managing role within a person, the actions and judgments that we create are ultimately more ethically significant than our desires, because actions can only happen with consent from the thinking being (73).

Using the Augustinian terms natura and persona, Stalnaker investigates Augustine’s idea of human nature and personhood in the fourth chapter. Augustine follows the biblical progress of human nature. Initially, God created humans in his image and “fashioned the bodies of Adam and Eve out of dust, and then He directly implanted their souls” (89). In the Garden of Eden, all of Adam and Eve’s needs and desires were generously satisfied and were free from disease and old age (89). In this basic, God given state, humans are pure, wholly good. But, Satan invaded the Garden of Eden through a serpent that coaxed Eve to eat the forbidden fruit; she did not realize that it was a sin (90). Angry that Eve had disobeyed Him, God cast Eve out of Eden. Adam, not wanting to be separated from Eve, consciously and freely chose Eve over God (90). “Since all human beings are derived from Adam, and in him our shared natura was vitiated and corrupted when he chose to turn away from God” (107). From then on, all humans would be born with the Original Sin.

24 See Connolly 2015.
25 Stalnaker notes the possible feminist reading of Augustine’s work, but reaffirms that in the following texts, Augustine was as far from feminism as the Pluto is from the Sun (107).
26 Since all humans are born with the Original Sin, the argument that gay and queer people were born as such, therefore, should not be condemned is useless, even disadvantageous, because all humans are already born sinners. Gay and queer people, under this rhetoric, just sin through homosexuality and other deviant sexual behaviors.
The person, for Augustine, is comprised of two parts, the soul (anima) and body (corpus) (108-109). He maintains God’s omnipotence by arguing that the human soul is voluntarily self-corrupted (110). The mind within the body keeps a record of human pleasures and our habit builds. Thus, once we have been placed onto this habitual cycle, it grows more difficult to return to our Eden state.

The fifth chapter is dedicated building his first bridge concepts on human nature and personhood between Augustine and Xunzi. Reiterating, Stalnaker was attracted to work with Augustine and Xunzi because they believe that human nature has a predisposition towards evil. But, Augustine believes that humans resist moral reformation and it is God who needs to intervene for humans to become ethical beings, while Xunzi writes that humans have a desire to and can reform by themselves, but only after their instincts lead them into harm’s way.

Stalnaker repeats his previous method and begins with Xunzi’s personal formation in chapter six. There are four stages for Xunzi’s personal formation: the petty person, the educated man, the noble man, and the sage. The journey to sagehood lies with spiritual exercises that are supposed to shape human qing (情), “disposition,” so they could match wenli (文理), “refined form and good order” (185). For Xunzi, there is a slim, but still, a chance that an individual can attain sagehood. To reach the ultimate ethical state, Xunzi advises three exercises: xue (學), “learning,” li (禮), “ritual,” and yue (樂), “music” (185), which is a combination of textual study that focuses on classical texts like Documents, Odes, Rituals, Music, and Spring and Autumn Annals, in addition to integrating these lessons into one’s daily existence (185).

There are seven stages to Augustine’s Theory of Personal Reformation: fear (timor), holiness/piety (pietas), knowledge (scientia), courage/resolution (fortitude), compassionate judgment/counsel (consilium misericordiae), genuine understanding (intellectus), and wisdom (sapientia). These phases are not linear or tasks to be completed, they are cumulative levels (239). Even if one has attained knowledge, it does not mean that they have conquered their fear. Augustine believes that partaking in spiritual exercises amounts to “choreographed movements… of persons’ willing submission and obedience to God” (236). The initiative lies in humans to begin and continue their spiritual exercises, but only God can pronounce beatitude, or extreme blessedness, upon humans again (236). Thus, humans, if they wish to return to God, they must diligently practice piety so that one day they may be blessed with God’s grace again.

In the last comparative section, chapter eight, Stalnaker clarifies several important issues. There is a distinct disparity between Augustine’s ultimate moral authority as God, and Xunzi’s idea of 天 tian or “Heaven”; while tian occupies “the supreme ritual position in the cosmos…, it is not the sort of entity that issues moral commands or ensures the ultimate justice of events” (249). In other words, Augustine’s God knows all and is the highest authority on morals, but Xunzi’s higher being is an ethereal being that does not cast judgment. This creates the issue of whether Augustine and Xunzi’s understanding of virtue ethics can ever be reconciled, given the different answers to whether human agency towards goodness is in the hands of humans (to be discussed later in the essay). In sum, Augustine and Xunzi both believe that the “unregenerate human [is] caught between desires for pleasure, dominance, and safety,” which they believe is problematic and wholly negative (257). They both advocate that self-restraint of immediate
impulses is crucial for making progress towards virtue. But, the main divergence is the consent issue of whether humans can ever be virtuous without a higher power (257).

In the final portions of the book, Stalnaker affirms that he does not want to determine any “global judgment of truth or superiority” of whether Xunzi’s or Augustine’s practices are better than the other (291). He has provided the reader a detailed account of both authors that showcase the positives and negatives of each. The linkage between Xunzi and Augustine, Stalnaker argues, is that they both undertake “chastened intellectualism.” Chastened “means to have restraint or moderate effect on (object).” The “intellectualism” portion refers to a commitment to text-based learning and intellectual reflection. Therefore, putting the two together, chastened intellectualism, in Stalnaker’s sense, is a position that “affirms the value of intellectual apprehension and reflection, but it questions the neutrality and absolute sovereignty of thinking” (275). Since both Xunzi and Augustine root much of their teachings in using education through intentional self-reflection and reading spiritual texts (Biblical or Confucian texts, in this case) as a means to reform oneself, they fall into Stalnaker’s conception of chastened intellectualism.

Arguably, the most important aspect of ethical theory is its application and feasibility. While many modern philosophical ethics concentrate only on theories of the “right” or “good,” the enormous meta definitions, Xunzi and Augustine also provide guidance on how one should employ these philosophies in their daily lives (276). According to Stalnaker, it is a grave mistake to forgo the practical implications because “it would presuppose a naïve voluntarism, as well as an unreasonably benign account of human nature” (276).

In his final prescriptions, Stalnaker reveals that to effectively and responsibly partake in comparative philosophy, we must navigate a two-level approach to ethics and politics (293). While, ideas that we engage in “need general but vague views in order to facilitate political and diplomatic relationships,” he notes that we also need “to nurture and follow more specific traditions of personal development” to “follow with integrity our considered conclusions about ultimate value” and have rich philosophic debates (293-294).

Concluding his work, Stalnaker advocates for “‘global neighborliness’ as a regulative ideal for comparative studies of religious thought and for relating to religious ‘others’ in general” (299). He takes this metaphor as treating your peers or “neighbors” not as subjects to impose your beliefs onto, but as “potential teachers” (299). This advocates for a general “openness that refuses to fear the neighbor as a potential or likely threat” (299). A person’s having differing opinions does not mean that they are threatening or endangering your beliefs (299). This attitude must be the first line of engagement or else all opportunities will transpire through accidents, not through intention (299). One must remain curious and attentive about others’ “ideas, practices, and general modes of life”; afford others with charitable interpretations where from the outset one doesn’t regard the other as a fool or villain; take the others seriously not in a blanket acceptance of difference or pedestaling the other format, but truly engage with them; find similarities in differences and differences in similarities by not immediately assimilating to the most familiar concept; not overgeneralize a religion or tradition; finally, respond tactfully and respectfully even when the other does not seem to deserve it (299-301). Stalnaker maintains that there is no correct religion or tradition that is necessary to achieve human goodness, rather, as

long as one practices chastened intellectualism prescribed by the religion, they will be on track to be ethical beings (301). It is not the ideas about goodness that make us good, but our application of our constantly developing and reforming convictions (301).

**Critical Commentary**

Broadly, I find Stalnaker’s *Overcoming Our Evil* to be a well-executed application of ethical comparative philosophy to the extent of humanity’s reach. By this, I mean I do not believe that humans have the ability to reach an objective understanding of the world now or ever, but given the subjective constraints we live under, Stalnaker successfully completes an ethically written philosophical comparison. Even though Augustine and Xunzi are not perfectly equivalent texts, Stalnaker is able to find points of comparison that is not too generalized or narrow. Both of the theorists examined were explained carefully and in extreme detail. He also recognizes that the works and concepts he uses are not a complete match. In this section, I will examine Stalnaker’s concept of global neighborliness, bridge concepts, and chastened intellectualism.

As explained in my summary, Stalnaker puts forth some guidelines on how to ethically do comparative philosophy or global neighborliness. To reiterate, they are: be open and eager to learn, afford others charitable interpretations, take other’s commitments seriously, find similarities in differences and differences in similarities, recognize complexity and nuance, and always remain tactful. These are excellent principles for any person to follow, but I still feel dissatisfied in them. It is not there is something inherently flawed in this advice, but that I already assumed that most people followed these measures. I do not find treating others with care, dignity, and respect as a revolutionary attitude. Since these, to me, are basic tenets to be a respectful individual in interactions, I began first thinking about the power dynamics in the comparison at hand, but also who this book was written for—who is the audience?

I admire Stalnaker’s aspiration for careful consideration of these texts especially with the power dynamics between the East and the West. He is a professor at Indiana University at Bloomington under the Religious Studies Department. Therefore, there is already a power imbalance at play because his background has historical power that affords him certain privileges, which is why I respect his vigilant examination of Xunzi’s texts so as to not overstep or impose any western ideologies without equal eastern representation and exploration onto his work. Thus, he is providing an adequate ethical comparison model for others in his similar social position to follow.

Which brings us to the question: Who is his audience? I ask this question to understand better why Stalnaker’s concept of global neighborliness is the main conclusion. I am not critiquing or disagreeing with the conclusion, I am looking at the need for these rules to be stated. In the intellectual regions where I work, such as feminist theory and feminist philosophy, I generally do not encounter authors who outright dismiss or diminish their “opponent” or fellow intellectual—unless the opponent is one who is in a position of power and has put forth disparaging and elitist thought. Otherwise, there is an emphasis on treating the other with deep reverence and openness. Which is why, when I originally read the ending of this book, I did not recognize it as a guideline; I merely thought it was a reiteration of known social mannerisms.
But, then I remembered Stalnaker’s probable audience: parties interested in philosophy and religious studies. I cannot speak for religious studies, but in my experience, philosophy has a gender problem. Statistically, only 30% of Philosophy bachelors, masters, and doctorate graduates are women. Philosophy also has a race problem. This statistic is even more severe with 5% to 17% graduates of color. Essentially, philosophy, at least in the undergraduate division is still dominated by white men, who as a class have been the primary oppressors in numerous societies. It is no secret that those who hold privilege often deny their privilege because they have never known what it is to live without said privilege. There are numerous works on white male privilege, which I will not expand on because this is a sub-argument, but essentially, those with privilege move through the world, more often than not, unmediated by society, culture, or respect towards others.

I am not trying to denigrate the white male population, but my point is, the reason there is a need for Stalnaker’s conclusion is that not all people have been informed or persistently required to treat others with care, dignity, respect, and tact. Cisgender (when one’s gender matches their assigned gender identity at birth) women are often sexually harassed in public, commanded to smile or face possible violence, and normally instructed that when bad situations happen to them that it is their fault. Then, cisgender women must walk with care through streets, smile when obliged by a random entitled street harasser, and accept blame for violence enacted upon them, i.e. rape. In another case, many students of color, especially immigrant students, are taught that their accented English is an issue. Consequently, many students of color undergo years of linguistic erasure to remove the foreignness that white supremacy saw as debilitating. As a result, they grow hyperaware of their speech patterns when in public, manipulating their tongue, and second-guessing their words. This is not to say all people who do not fall in the white male category face these issues on a personal level, but on a systemic (macro) level, these difficulties exist and are prevalent. Therefore, those not in the white male category, have been socialized to be cognizant of their actions and their words, whereas, those not in socially vulnerable positions are insulated from many of these issues. This is why it is necessary for Stalnaker to advise his readers (philosophy and religious studies cohorts who are predominately white males) to treat others with respect, dignity, and care because it is not always common sense.

Again, I want to emphasize that I am not mocking the conclusion of Stalnaker’s book or the study of comparative ethics and philosophy. This book does serve an educational purpose… for a very select group of privileged individuals. I agree with the conclusion and I appreciate the painstaking attention to detail and respect that Stalnaker executes. But, this is part of my

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28 Statistic provided by American Academy of Arts and Sciences on their 30-year research on “Gender Distribution of Degrees in Philosophy.”
29 Statistic provided by American Academy of Arts and Sciences on their 20-year research on “Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Degrees in Philosophy.”
30 I call these people “philosobros.” I’ve had many a nights examining this phenomenal with my women and gender non-conforming philosophy friends, thinking about the gender/race dynamics in our classes and the persistent nature of self-induced blindness on privilege from philosobros. Examples of “philosobro-ing” include but are not limited to: dominating a conversation, not allowing others to speak, cutting off women and women professors, telling women they are overreacting or being emotional, misogynistic/elitist/racist comments, denying the existence of privilege, asserting their perspective as the true objective one, using incorrect pronouns, and not being open to challenges from non-white men.
argument. The very fact that I take note of a white man treating another as a person with all due respect and civility is representative of the privilege and power dynamics already at hand. It is only in an unjust and unequal world where one party is praised for showing another basic human decency. Whereas all other non-white men, are supposed and required to treat others with equal respect, if not more depending on the individual. It is only in a white supremacist and patriarchal society where a white man treating another human being with decency is a rarity and considered extraordinary and admirable.

Now let me turn to look at Stalnaker’s bridge theory in-depth. In the personal formation section, Stalnaker notes the disparity between Augustine’s humanely unachievable rise to purity and Xunzi’s difficult but achievable rise to sagehood. It might seem like there is a gaping hole in Stalnaker’s theory—how can he compare two ideologies that do not have the same likelihood of their end goal? For Augustine, it is impossible in human form without God. For Xunzi, it is possible but not without onerous work from the individual. So, it can be argued that because their attainability of “sagehood” for Xunzi and perfect morality for Augustine do not align, they cannot satisfactorily be compared. While I understand this misalignment argument, I counter this question by asking: Can two ideologies ever truly be identically matched and thus wholly comparable? I do not believe that any two theories, religions, or traditions have the same critical points. To have theories that are true mirrors would be ideal, but, unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. Thus, we must accommodate our examinations for our less-than-ideal world. Then, we must create working models that allow room for mismatches. So, although there is a significant difference between Augustine and Xunzi’s end goal feasibility, they are still “working” towards human reformation and progress. This is the point of interest, the “bridge concept,” or the linkage between the two authors. By focusing on this bridge concept, Stalnaker is able to look into the processes instead of focusing on the ends.

If one were to attempt to understand and maybe even attain human goodness or excellence, according to Stalnaker, chastened intellectualism is the way to go. The message of chastened intellectualism is simple: study the scripture, voluntarily submit to teachers, be part of a community of like-minded folks, and practice what you study (277-278). Voluntary association is essential to this because one must want to reform oneself. If the religion or organization uses coercive tactics to manipulate one into following their order, this will not result in the individual’s personal formation because they did not choose (279).

While I find this compelling because of the “practice what you preach” notion, I am still worried about the whether one can accomplish human goodness or excellence if the teachings they follow are flawed or misguided. This is not a critique on the religions or traditions themselves, but a general uneasiness about which truth is the right truth and how could anyone know confidently. I can imagine a number of people following a religion that says that one class of people is inherently inferior, thus must be controlled and obedient (similar to how Christianity speaks about women needing to obey the men in their lives). At what point is studying these texts and practicing them, enabling oneself to become more moral and leading to human goodness? If it is the human goodness that the text outlines that one is pursuing, then they may very well end up reaching that goal, or at least coming closer to it. But if we are attempting to find the essence of human goodness and its manifestation, then we need more than the chastened intellectualism of many religions or traditions.
Stalnaker answers this by arguing that the most important aspect of chastened intellectualisms is the need for comparison between different religions or traditions (293). Stalnaker believes that through comparison, an individual can find deeper meaning and possible moral reformation in their study. In fact, the reason why Xunzi and Augustine could create their moral prescriptions was that they both studied ethics in a diverse fashion. They borrowed and looked into numerous traditions, “engaged in systematic elaboration of the truth…and allowed for modest correction to resolve particular difficulties” (297). The case in point, Xunzi and Augustine engaged in “careful, systematic synthesis” (297). Only in this constant comparison can any enlightenment come about.

I do believe in the merit of open-ended conclusions, or “temporary conclusions” as I like to call them, yet I am not convinced by the practice of “seek, practice, and you shall find” of chastened intellectualism. If the conclusion for Stalnaker is that chastened intellectualism allows for the possibility for human virtue, then I agree. But, this is similar to saying that anything has the potential to craft human goodness. It seems that Stalnaker is advocating that the path to enlightenment is paved with deep study and even deeper reflection, but this is not an answer—it is only a path. What still is left unanswered is whether virtue can be attained through this method.

In order to be attained through this method, this would imply that humans have or will have the answer to virtuousness. If these implications are correct, this theory follows Xunzi’s path that humans have the ability to find goodness more than Augustine’s view that only God can bestow virtuosity back into humans. If humans do have the capacity to solve ethics, then this brings the question of how many comparisons need to happen before one can be satisfied in their findings. Stalnaker’s feasibility clause, where the moral theory must be actionable, does help solidify the idea that morality can be found through human understanding, but I believe there needs to be more.

This leads into another question of what are the conditions for human virtue and whether humans can fulfill them. If humans do have the key to this answer, will it be an “objective” understanding of human goodness or “subjective”? Given the constraints of this essay, I cannot explore this topic in-depth. But, I do not believe that humans have the ability to perceive issues, events, or even objects objectively. I believe that the idea of objectivity is a dangerous concept because it has the potential of silencing discussions in the future, thus leading to a coercive society, which does not allow for chastened intellectualism or diversity of thought, whereas, if human goodness can be understood subjectively, I am more inclined to accept this possibility. But even if human virtue is relative to its context, time, location, and culture, then I wonder whether this would be a helpful conclusion for any society. If it is only applicable in certain places at certain times, then how is it different from any other religion or tradition? I support the concept of temporary truths only because I do not believe that humans can attain objectivity, but this does not mean I am enthusiastic about this concept.

I enjoyed thinking through Aaron Stalnaker’s book. I am convinced that he practices comparisons ethically and in keeping with his concept of global neighborliness. While I do believe that chastened intellectualism is a nudge in the right direction, it still does not answer our
ethical questions. One may as well be told that they should read more books or live a fuller life so they can gather experiences and ideas to compare, learn, and practice them so that they may one day learn true morality. Stalnaker does not answer, he only advises, which works in his favor because there is no concrete conclusion. Thus, there is not a lot of substance that can be mulled over because he is only claiming that this is a possible way, not the way, or even a way. It is a light non-conclusion conclusion. I am not disparaging his conclusion, but if steps are to be made forward in virtue ethics, there needs to be solid orientations of how to move ahead.
Beyond Convention: Balancing Morality’s Underlying Tensions


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Katrin Froese approaches ethics through the lenses of both Western and Chinese philosophers pulling from their different perspectives on the importance but also the limits of moral principles that govern a person’s or groups behavior. Her work is constructive; she builds from philosophers who hold ethics as central to our human existence and ends on philosophers who question the possible codification of these moral frameworks that, once rigidified risk slipping into the unethical. While each chapter engages in a comparison of two philosophers from either Western or Chinese traditions of thought, the goal of her work is not comparative. Rather, it seems that each philosopher are woven into a web of interconnected issues surrounding ethics.

The first part of Ethics Unbound focuses on philosophers who hold up ethics as the inviolable ground of human existence. Confucius, Kant, Mencius and Rousseau serve to highlight why morality is essential. While these philosophers diverge greatly in their philosophies, they all uphold the idea of creating a framework in which individuals can properly engage with life by constructing an understanding of the notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. In the first chapter, Froese deconstructs Kant’s and Confucius’s philosophies not only to emphasize the inevitable necessity for ethical frameworks in society, but also to shine lights on the possible concerns regarding their approaches. Kant “insists that we imagine a world that transcends nature (Kingdom of Ends) wherein the purity of form prevails,” whereas “Confucius remarks that ethics is a particularly human way of integrating into the world” (12). While Kant places emphasis on making ethical decisions, Confucius places emphasis on becoming a moral person. Both view morality as a process. However, while Kant understands morality as an unattainable goal, Confucius would view it as a life-long process that may after rigorous practice eventually becomes effortless.

Kant explains that “I must imagine that I am part of a world in which each individual human being is an end in herself, apart from the world of nature,” thus, “I must act as though my act could be based in a universalizable maxim” (18). Kant views morality as central to our humanity because it enables us to mark our own distinctiveness from nature. While there will always be tension between our natural desires and our capacity to reason, having a sense of duty is “triumph over nature within ourselves” (20). To Kant, this tension is what gives life to morality: “he recognizes the need for contradiction that sustains morality. It is always in the making because it will always meet resistance” (23). To Confucius morality is not a separate realm distinct from nature, but rather our way of participating in the cosmos. He posits a world in which we are intrinsically connected to a continuous whole. We participate in the harmony of the
cosmos through morality. Morality places us in its hierarchical order, rooting within us a sense of belonging. For Confucius,  

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refines our continuity, fostering a harmonious society within a unified cosmos. Engaging in morality through  

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demands an arduous, continuous process of self-cultivation. But this process is necessary and sets us on the right path towards virtue. Thus, Confucius emphasizes the importance of tradition and culture because they give us concrete examples of proper behavior.

Froese ends her first chapter with a consideration of the possible moral troubles that arise from defining an ethical framework. In creating a moral realm, an immoral realm is inevitably created. “Kant notes that evil is only possible in the wake of moral freedom because the evil person, while fully cognizant of the moral path, deliberately chooses to not only ignore it but rather actively subvert it.” Froese states: “Kant hints at what he dare not say…. [M]orality may make evil possible” (54). While Confucius would respond that proper education would thwart the possibility for evil, Froese highlights the tension between the ideology of moral education and the reality of its implementation: the potential risks of morality becoming codified and slipping into the unethical. Her two main concerns come from the value put on public recognition in how  

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is practiced and the limits of the “local and cultural context” that is central to  

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that demands continuous self-reflection. It is understandable that if engaging in  

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leads to social recognition, it might be easier to simply strive for social acceptance and exempt ourselves from the arduous work of self improvement. In doing so, one might find a sense of belonging. However, if the values aren’t actually upheld intrinsically, these moral lessons can risk becoming devoid of meaning. For the latter concern, Froese notes, “Confucian philosophy recognizes that the seeds of morality must be sown within a strong community wherein individuals can nurture their concern for others and where concepts of self include rather than exclude the other” (56). In practice encountering other cultures in which we cannot identify “local and cultural context” may cultivate parochialism and lead to misconstruing difference as immoral.

While Froese does not present Kant’s negation of nature as problematic within his own philosophy, she seems to push towards the idea that ethics needs to work in communion with nature and not against it. This leads us into her second chapter, “Organic Virtue: Reading Mencius and Rousseau”. Both philosophers, while having very different approaches, emphasize “reflection upon nature as a key component of exercising moral judgment” (59). To Rousseau, morality is created in order to compensate for the loss of our natural moorings by defining guidelines that foster coexistence within communities and deter us from spiraling into egoism. This spiral of egoism was marked by the acquisition of property, forcing individuals to engage and view nature as something to be possessed and controlled. Thus, what makes morality necessary is what keeps it alive. Rousseau understands morality as our imperfect way of compensating for our inevitable shortcomings. However, “The vastness of the moral horizon in Mencius is seen as an opportunity rather than as a testament to human shortcomings.” To Mencius, morality refines our connection to nature,  

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channels our predisposed sprouts for virtue and allows for a continuous process of self-extension. Like Confucius, Mencius views individuals as part of a continuous cosmos, and morality provides the tools that refine our connection with the dynamic and fluctuating flow of nature’s natural patterns. Mencius, however, views morality as more accessible than Confucius because humans are naturally

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Li: “use of ritualized patterns and social relationships” (26).
predisposed to cultivate virtue. Education through li is crucial in order for these sprouts to bloom. Froese notes, “By reading Mencius in conjunction with Rousseau, one can see that both morality and selfishness arise in part from a sense of lack and imbalance within social orders” (77). While understood differently, for both philosophers selfishness poses a threat to morality. Selfishness is marked by our desire to be an end to ourselves, which fuels our desire to possess and control nature. For Mencius constructing a notion of shame through li should suffice in containing our inherent selfishness and instead incline us to overcome desires of possession by attuning ourselves to the harmonious cosmos through self-extension. However Froese notes Rousseau’s caution on the limits of shame: “double-edged sword since it spawns feelings of incompleteness that can foster the misguided attempt to become complete unto ourselves, unleashing seemingly unstoppable spirals of egoism” (232).

Chapter two thus inclines us to think of nature as closely intertwined with the notion of morality. It seems that while morality is essential to our human existence and education plays a major role in ensuring our understanding of moral principles, ethics’ conventional tendencies can be problematic. While Confucius and Mencius highlight the importance of sensitivity to situations and advocate embracing otherness, the practice of li seems insufficient to prevent the codification of moral principles, which can lead into destructive spirals of egoism. Kant’s Kingdom of Ends and notion of duty also seem limiting in that their universalizing tendencies can foster exclusion lacking the proper tools to deal with the particularity of the other. While these philosophers focus on the process of morality rather than its goal, it seems that Froese inclines us to believe that achieving morality is possible. However, believing we have achieved morality is problematic because it instills the notion that we possess it. Thus, it seems conventional ethics are a stage of ‘morality’. We must find ways to go beyond its convention in order to preserve its dynamic and avoid rendering it stagnant.

The second part of Froese’s book is titled “Vices of Virtue.” Vice is commonly defined as immoral or wicked behavior whereas virtue is understood as behavior showing high moral standards. While the terms are usually defined in opposition to each other, Froese in her title anticipates the ideas that one cannot exist without the other, and that within virtue there is vice. In positing that I am virtuous, I risk becoming comfortable in the idea that I possess “morality” and rest in convention. In acknowledging the vices of virtue, Froese notes ways of going beyond the potential risk of ethics becoming codified. Chapter three is titled “Strangers to Ethics: Kierkegaard and Daoist Approaches.” Kierkegaard and Daoist philosophers both emphasize the idea of embracing the particular. Kierkegaard seeks to make a clear distinction between the self and the other through recognizing our own particularity and thus the particularity of the other. In doing so, we avoid the risk of enforcing an idea of assimilation within our moral frameworks which might deviate into parochialism. “Kierkegaard insists that if we are truly to respond to the other as other, without attempting to reduce her to a version of ourselves, then the differentiation between self and other must be vigorously maintained” (102). Daoist thought is not interested in the idea of crafting an identity and rather focuses on seamlessly adapting to situations without necessitating a fixed conception of the self. Froese notes that Daoists reject conventional ethics because they are “predicated on cultivating the formless, not as a negation of form but rather as an opening that allows for the flourishing of different forms” (101).
Chapter three highlights the tension between morality and its limits in addressing the particularity of human beings. Froese notes the problem that Kant’s universalizing tendencies and Confucius’s and Mencius’s emphasis on assimilation risk undermining our own particularity. The tensions lying within the conventional realm of ethics seem insufficient; rather, it appears we need unconventional approaches that allow for multiple perspectives. Thus, tension is highlighted through a need to move between preserving the structure of moral frameworks and going beyond them in order to dance between the familiarity and the strangeness of others. As Froese notes, “Kierkegaard’s philosophy sheds light on the limits of ethical systems, which manifest a disturbing discomfort with the stranger and therefore fail to appreciate the diversity of the world.” Guidelines of behavior can lead to instilling a comfort in the familiar that can deviate into a rejection of the stranger. We must challenge conventions in order to learn how to embrace the particular and the strangeness of the other. Thus, morality does not become stuck in coded notions of assimilation. To go beyond morality, Kierkegaard believes we must take a leap of faith by instilling a trust in the unknown; God. Complete faith in the unknown allows us to overcome the feeling of loss and wandering that can occur when we are faced with what we do not know. Daoist thought pushes beyond the ego and detaches from all notion of identity: “the self is seen as one particular among many who engage in an ongoing process of mutual creation.” This allows for an openness towards others, embracing difference as the same not by conflating one with the other but rather by recognizing the interconnectedness in our differences. In avoiding labels such as self and other, we overcome the fixity of conventional ethics and allow for continuous transformation.

It appears, Froese advocates the idea that the notion of morality needs to be revisited. In order to do this we need a stage beyond convention that does not necessarily exclude its existence. Thus, she leads us into the final chapter: “Beyond Good and Evil: Flexible Ethics in Nietzsche and Daoist thought.” Here, she notes the necessity of going beyond notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ lies not only in embracing the particular but also in preserving the essence of ethics. Nietzsche believes “in order for a moral system to grow, one must find someone to blame, and thus good is a derivative of evil which arises out of the tendency to impute to others the responsibility for one’s ailments” (174). He notes that the notion of morality on which ethics are based is flawed in that the binaries of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ end up resting on preserving unequal power dynamics. While this is not the goal of morality, these binaries can rest on fixed conventions fostering a desire to control and possess morality instead of participating in a process highlighting openness and transformation. Moreover, pitting notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ against each other renders ‘evil’ seductive. Conventional ethics create limitations, which can fuel our natural desires to transgress without giving any thought to reconstruction falling prisoner to our constructed notion of ‘evil’. Natural desires that ethics often repress are not necessarily ‘evil’ if they are properly channeled and balanced in ways that cultivate openness and transformation. While Nietzsche would not advocate dispensing with morality, we must go beyond its conventions in order to avoid a sense of suffocation that conflates comfort in guidelines of behavior with our being. “Nietzsche does not deny that conceptual impetus of human beings is necessary to provide them with some semblance of calm. However, we must recognize that these concepts are merely crutches and never become substitutes for being” (16). Moral principles are necessary so long as they do not veer into repressing our natural desires and are counterbalanced with unconventional approaches that channel continual transformation and openness to multiple perspectives. Froese notes that Daoist philosophers also take issue with the notion of moral
principles: “when one draws up a blueprint for correct behavior, one also shapes the immoral behavior that emerges in an attempt to resist these prescriptions” (220). Thus, we must revisit our understanding of morality so we do not seek to meet an objective standard but rather adapt to situations focusing on doing things well and harmoniously. Terms like *wuwei* counterbalance morality to avoid its reification and allow for openness that draws on spontaneity and the potential of others. Thus, Froese maintains that ethics are central to our human existence but moral values need to be challenged and revisited in order to avoid its reification.

The author engages with the dialectic of ethics through the means of comparison between philosophers from both Chinese and Western traditions of thought. The idea is not to pit the philosophies against each other in order to figure out which has a better solution to the paradox of ethics. Rather, Froese flushes out the approaches of each philosopher to engage us in a dialogue reflecting on the nature and the limits of its existence. The structure of the book is multi-dimensional, and goes beyond the cyclical path that I attempted to present in the summary. While there is a clear trajectory: ethics are central to our human existence and education is necessary to ensure its implementation; cultivating a connection with nature is also essential in order for moral principles to prevail and to keep our reason in check.; the universalizing tendencies of ethics risk leaning towards assimilation and conventions thus excluding the particularity of the ‘stranger’; ethics become tied to ideas of dominating and controlling instead of opening up to embrace transformation and natural change. Thus, we must dance between the familiarity of conventional ethics but also going beyond its codifying tendencies in order to preserve the essence of morality.

Within her overall argument Froese creates an intricate web using the arguments put forth by the different philosophers. She bridges concepts across traditions in order to posit a new and compelling way of thinking about ethics. In her book Froese navigates through concepts like the notion of virtue, belonging and identity, the other and the self, all pertinent to a discussion surrounding ethics. It seems each concept requires its own discourse and demand different sets of corrections. However, these concepts are not independent issues of ethics and remain interconnected within the unified notion of morality. Thus, working through one aspect can bring to light issues concerning another issue. For example, in her conclusion Froese approaches ethics from the idea of belonging by presenting and challenging arguments from the different philosophers. While this is one entry point to ethics, the discussion surrounding ideas of belonging highlights issues concerning education and the notion of virtues. One could view her work as web of varied ethical concerns enabling us to focus on one issue to further explore others.

Thus, Froese creates interplay between different philosophers positing the multiplicity of ways in which we can approach ethics. She challenges concepts within their own tradition of thought but also moves beyond cross-cultural divides by presenting differing approaches to a similar issue. *Ethics Unbound* is a body of work very much in line with the interactionist

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32 *wuwei*: “which denotes a kind of activity that incorporates the stillness of motionless with the spontaneity of movement.” (218)

33 Interactionism “conceives of the relation of the self and the other dialectically; it denies that “at bottom” the self and the other are essentially distinct and fixed or that a particular identity means utter difference from that which it is not. Instead it insists that the identity of the self is intimately bound up with the identity of the other (and vice-
approach to global philosophy. In *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, Tim Connolly defines global philosophy as “engaging in philosophy in a way that is open to the insights and approaches from philosophers and philosophical traditions across the globe.” I argue that Froese’s work is interactionist in that it engages in comparisons that highlight both the particularity and the similarity of differing perspectives. Froese remains unfixed to one approach and instead seeks to find points of contact between these eight philosophers. It is important to note that Froese does not undermine the sociopolitical and cultural context of each philosopher but rather engages their ideas in ways that transcend such contexts in order to fuel a contemporary dialogue concerning ethics. Although Froese is transcending cultural boundaries, she makes the effort of properly defining each philosopher within their tradition of thought. The web of different ethical issues she highlights shows how varied perspectives can help work through possible corrections and revisions and bring to light another set of issues. Froese’s project is both engaging and open to insight. She makes a compelling analysis using Chinese and Western thought to fuel a discussion around the paradox of ethics. However, it does not seem the discussion needs to be limited to these eight philosophers. I would argue that the dialogue can be fueled further by incorporating other traditions of thought, such as varying Buddhist and Hindu approaches to ethics. Fleshing out the ethical philosophies of important Buddhist and Hindu philosophers might present other challenges to conventional morality and lead us to think about new ways of dancing in and outside of its conventional realm.

Froese’s project focuses on ethical problems by deconstructing varied perspectives. Thus, I would argue this book would be useful in a class like “Introduction to Ethics” that focuses on concepts rather than a specific socio-cultural context. While classes like “Classical Chinese Philosophy” demand focus on specific philosophers from a specific geographical context and time period, classes like “Introduction to Ethics” allow for a multiplicity of differing approaches. However, in most Western universities the course material for these classes is mainly Eurocentric. While the concerns raised are similar to that of Froese, they are only approached through the lens of western philosophers. I believe *Ethics Unbound* would be useful in so that it broadens the discussion around ethical paradoxes. Incorporating Chinese philosophers like Confucius and Zhuangzi, who each present valuable and particular insight, would enable students to broaden their scope of reflection and gain a better understanding of a more global approach to philosophy.

I am very intrigued by the cyclical idea that Froese advocates in her work. At first, I was inclined to find ways to break the cycle. However, I truly believe that the underlying tension existing in the dance between the conventional realm of ethics and beyond it is essential to our human existence. I am compelled by the Daoist idea of going beyond defined moral principles and remaining in a state of formlessness but I do not think that is necessarily a viable way of living in contemporary societies. I also wanted to find ways to make this dance easier, but this only highlighted the important need for arduous self-reflection. I believe Froese’s book pushes readers to reflect on their relationship to ethics. The way in which she deconstructs different ethical approaches challenges the reader to think about truth and why morality is so important to our human existence. The complex web of issues surrounding morality challenges the ethical frameworks in which we live and pushes us to revise concepts that we might take for granted like versa), that self and other are constantly in flux, and that they are both similar as well as different.” Connolly 2015, 289.
our understanding of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. While this process demands hard work, it does not limit itself to tedious effort.

The hard work can be counterbalanced with play and excitement; these terms do not need to work in opposition to each other. Froese demonstrates not only that they are complementary but also that meaning in ethics and thus our existence is found by bridging together what are seemingly contradictory terms. I would argue that balance enables us to dance in and outside the conventional realm of morality and preserve the vitality of its underlying tension. In order to avoid becoming stuck in convention or spiraling into destructive tendencies, individuals must be given the proper tools to construct their own internal locus of balance. This enables them to participate in life in ways that foster engagement, openness and mutual transformation. Balance is commonly defined as an even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady. Thus, we stay upright by evenly distributing our natural desires and our moral duties. Without balance, we risk leaning too far in either the direction of codified conventions or chaotic spirals of destruction. Both inhibit the natural, fluctuating flow of morality by rendering it stagnant. Froese’s book provides us with varying perspectives highlighting and challenging different ways in which we can achieve this balance. For example, cultivating the self through li can be counterbalanced with cultivating nothingness. By feeding our need for each in ways that are harmonious we create room for spontaneity and the unknown all while being comforted by the familiarity of our surroundings.

Participating in life instead of controlling it lies at the essence of morality. We define guidelines promoting certain types of behaviors over others in order for societies to coexist harmoniously and provide individuals with a sense of direction. This direction is meant to give us an idea of how to participate in life. However, these guidelines should not be considered fixed so that individuals have enough flexibility to respond to the specificity of situations or the particularity of others. Tension lies in finding ways to balance the two. Thus, I want to push further the idea of undertaking creative endeavors. In Ethics Unbound, Froese makes note of Nietzsche’s emphasis on music and metaphor: “music cannot be known; it can merely be participated in, since change and transformation are part of its dynamic” (254). I believe that undertaking creative projects that engage us critically but also encourage the use of imagination is a concrete manifestation of the exact tensions Froese highlights in her project. In doing so, we are able to dance between our own particularity and the familiarity of our worlds but also engage with others in ways that are open. The point of creative projects should not be to define a set truth but rather to inspire and encourage others to respond pushing for new ideas and allowing for multiple perspectives. This launches individuals in a dialogue, which can foster something similar to the Daoist notion of mutual transformation. Music, like ethics, is multidimensional and necessitates balance. While there are general guidelines that determine ‘good’ music, sensitivity to its context and tradition is necessary to embrace the particularity of different types of music. Usually music that is considered meaningful balances conventions and familiarity with strangeness and innovation. The creative undertaking of engaging with music is one way of shining light on the contradicting tensions that give meaning to our lives. Because music is constantly revisited and transformed it cannot become fixed. When one tries to codify certain types of music, others will find ways of subverting these codes. Similarly, if one tries to codify ethics as something to be possessed, others will find ways to push back.
Ethics are intertwined with being, it seeps into our daily lives and affects the way we interact. While ethical conventions provide comfort, Froese effectively highlights, using multiple perspectives, the possible unethical underbelly of conventions. Individuals need frameworks that instill a sense of belonging and identity but also need ways of escaping these frameworks to avoid a sense of suffocation. The flexibility and the fluidity of moving in and out of the realm of conventional morality seem essential to the way we engage with life. Creative endeavors are one concrete way of balancing this dance; we learn to participate in life by revisiting what we know to create something new shining light on our own perspective all while openly engaging with the other. In addressing the paradox of ethics, Froese makes a compelling argument that appears to work toward a more global approach to philosophy. Froese finds points of contact building a web connecting different ethical concepts. Through both Chinese and Western perspectives on morality she navigates the reader through these concepts showing how they each necessitate their own set of corrections but also how they are interconnected, each issue feeding into the other.
The Problem Below


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The Metaphysics of Kindness at its core is a well-researched and impressive work of comparative philosophy. Even to a reader who is relatively untrained in philosophical works (such as myself), Walden’s book clearly lays out his research and puts forward a series of chapters that serve as a suitable introduction to the thinkers they focus on. In addition the scope of his project is clearly defined and focused throughout. Despite these strengths I was left somewhat unsatisfied with the book when I considered it as a whole. Upon the completion of the book and reflecting upon both the goals and methodologies Walden himself has laid out, there are a few key points in which I believe *The Metaphysics of Kindness* skirts away from some of the more complex issues facing comparative philosophy and specifically when dealing with metaphysics. Perhaps these criticisms are somewhat unwarranted given Walden’s stated goals; certainly, bringing them up here should not diminish the successful and insightful interpretations of Zhu Xi, Śāntideva, Schopenhauer and Nishida that are in fact present.

The basic project of *The Metaphysics of Kindness* is an attempt to explore the viability of making “veridical moral judgments.” That is to say, this book explores the realm of making justified claims about whether one specific moral judgment or another can be deemed the true. As a result, Walden positions the “problem of the standard”—namely, the necessity of having a strict guide with which to measure a moral judgment against—as a central issue. An example of this might be something that looks like the word of God or some other objective doctrine. Asher Walden’s method of investigation here is through comparison. Specifically he begins his investigation with a conclusion asserted by one sort of philosophy and a description of the metaphysical preconditions necessary for that conclusion to be made. He then determines a problem with this assertion and looks to another philosophy with a different metaphysical framework or context and shows how that scheme sidesteps the issue found in the previous philosophical work. This is what leads to the book’s structure of five chapters, four of which focus on a specific thinker and one, which sets up the problem Walden is exploring. The brief summary that follows is in an effort to articulate the type of arguments Walden puts forth in this book, in order to provide a context in which my own concerns arise.

Summary

The initial chapter begins with a discussion of progressive versus conservative moralities. These two moralities seem to hold values that are irreconcilable with each other. The point Walden draws out of this comparison is that when someone acts in accordance with progressive morals rather than conservative ones (or vice versa), they are locked within a specific paradigm
of morality. From an outside perspective the actions of an individual can seem amoral; in reality an individual is just operating from a different perspective of what is and isn’t moral. Essentially Walden is asserting that we all attempt to act morally. Where we run into problems when is we encounter people with different standards of what is and isn’t moral action.

Nietzsche’s master/slave morality is introduced to better express the idea of separate moral schemes that are justifiable depending on one’s individual subjective standing. Master moralities based upon hierarchical classes often clash with slave moralities that can be loosely associated with “Christian” values. It should be noted that often a more realistic example of a moral doctrine is a combination of both Master and Slave morality. From this description, Walden turns the conversation from disagreements in moral systems to whether or not it’s possible to justify a given moral system in a truly objective sense. These disagreements are sidestepped in favor of an examination of whether or not a standard on which to judge moral actions can even be set.

Walden offers up Zhuangzi and moralities based upon the existence of God as two ends of a spectrum. On the more skeptical end is Zhuangzi denies the idea that there is “one natural and inevitable standard for human judgment, especially (but not solely) moral judgment” (13). Zhuangzi’s position is one that builds out of a Daoist metaphysical framework that denies an individual’s ability to distinguish any event in isolation and value it as “good or bad.” Walden here illustrates this point with the classic example of a farmer’s horse running away and the multifarious classically considered good and bad outcomes that occur as a result (16). Despite this rather ambiguous and potential bleak moral outlook, Zhuangzi skirts the problem of having a moral standard by asserting a sort of moral relativity. Zhuangzi believes that right and wrong comes down to what people believe is right and wrong. This view is different from a subjectivist view of morality, stating instead that good/bad judgments are based on a number of factors such as language, culture, community, and perspective. Morals are justified in a way that is simultaneously not objective and not wholly arbitrary (26).

On the far end of this spectrum are faith-based moralities. In these sorts of moralities God is the litmus test for good and bad. This gives us an objective truth about what are good and bad, however it requires one to fully buy into a specific metaphysical doctrine. In addition there can be some attacks launched as to how we come to know what exactly an inaccessible God deems moral. This type of metaphysical viewpoint provides a moral certainty that most other types of philosophies cannot, however it comes with additional problems. Each of the philosophers that Walden chooses to examine from this point forward fall somewhere between the moral skepticism put forth by Zhuangzi and objectivism of a faith-based morality, and in addition can all be classified as having moral systems based upon a type of compassion.

The Neo-Confucian thinker, Zhu Xi, is the first thinker Walden puts forth to get around the problem of the standard. Neo-Confucians believe they have a solution stemming from their metaphysical framework. The establishment of \( li \) and \( qi \) as structured morality, combined with the fundamental belief that human nature is good, suggests a solution or at least way around the problem of the standard. For Zhu Xi, the mere fact that we distinguish things means that there is a way of justifying what we deem to be good and bad.
Zhu believes we can tap into this facet of our judgment within a moral context. This rests on the “the empirical existence and excellence in the person of the Sages of the tradition, as well as the somewhat less accomplished authoritativeness of his teachers and contemporaries.” (53) Our ability to recognize sages and those with moral superiority is a given within Zhu Xi’s framework. The upshot is morality isn’t just li, but instead is something found in a product of li actualized through qi. It just so happens that sages are the actualized-qi-havers we are looking for. Walden puts it best stating that “Instead of finding a transcendent standard (such as telos) and then defining goodness as what measures up to that standard we start with the differential functioning of the moral feelings between ordinary persons and those who are recognized as moral exemplars, and then define the standard in terms of that difference and in terms of the communally recognized training program that allows, in principle, any person to become such an exemplar” (60). Zhu Xi avoids the problem of the standard by putting forth the model of the sages as a metric by which to gauge our actions and in most cases such sagely action takes the form of something that looks a great deal like compassion. In Walden’s description of sageliness, he takes seriously ideas such as love, loyalty and family. In a given context such as the famous example finding out your father is guilty of committing a crime, an appropriate Confucian response is “that one should not turn one’s father in. Presumably, the way [we know] this [is] from the investigation of [one’s] feeling, and [we feel] that loyalty to one’s father outweighs justice” (54).

Walden moves from Zhu Xi to the nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Like with Zhu, Walden first lays out a detailed description of Schopenhauer’s epistemological/metaphysical framework, which is built from a reinterpretation of Platonic forms. Chief among this reinterpretation is Schopenhauer’s idea of the Will. The Will is a malignant, metaphysical existence that controls not only the actions of individual, intelligent agents, but also ultimately all observable phenomena. Put plainly “Our bodies just our what we appear to ourselves and our Will is what we are” (72). The Will is “the thing-in-itself” that appearances merely point toward. Accessing this Will that exists under things is how we derive moral truths.

Thinking of the Will as what motivates all action, the presence of compassion within this scheme is what Schopenhauer believes is the basis of moral action. Compassion here is defined as feeling pain when others are in pain. It should be noted that our character, as manifested by our actions, that in turn points to our Will, is important to this moral equation as well. Our character is an imperfect reflection of our Wills, as such, Schopenhauer advocates for something that resembles a virtue ethics. We need to practice in order to develop our characters to more perfectly reflect our individual Wills. Will is motivation; character is what one empirically does. Thus we develop a moral system that is based on motivations as the method of judgment. We can only judge to what degree one is successful in carrying out their Will, otherwise it’s a question of relativity; as Walden points out, we can’t judge one for having the Will of a sheep versus the Will of a wolf, we can only judge how well one carries out their respective Will (93). In regards to an individual’s actions we are left in a situation where one’s moral actions can be judged if their individual Will subscribes them to act in such a way. This leaves compassion in a somewhat tough spot for Schopenhauer. He concludes that compassion is likely what should be the judgment for moral action, but it is not one that can be utilized if one does not have compassion in their Will.
Walden puts forth Śāntideva’s Buddhist response to this motivational problem. Śāntideva is a Buddhist, and thus he holds a conception that there is not human nature and no nature of the cosmos with which human nature may or may not be continuous, for the simple reason that there is not self-nature at all. Ultimately the author interprets Śāntideva’s Buddhism as a kind of skepticism that tries to motivate moral actions by something other than divine command. Working on the principle of reductio ad absurdum Śāntideva tries to debunk the reliance on God for example as a way of justifying a morality. Śāntideva instead makes moral claims based on the self being merely an illusion, a masking on the truth that we are just part of a whole and don’t have a real sense of self. This could lead to an argument that moralities are just merely illusory as well; there is a Buddhist line of thinking where moral norms are dictated on the “basis convention and consensus” (110) rather than any deeper truths.

Śāntideva argues against this conclusion by asserting that since the self has no intrinsic existence, it is reasonable for one to be just as concerned about the happiness of other people as that of oneself. This is the argument structure: Because there is no true self, there is no relevant difference between one’s own suffering and that of others, so that if one wants to end one’s own suffering one must if one is to be consistent also seek to end the suffering of others. Second, the opponent replies that there is indeed a relevant difference since my own suffering is my own: I am the one who feels it, while I don’t feel others’ suffering. This is rebuked by pointing out moments when we do feel others’ suffering. Take for example the idea that one tries to prevent the suffering of “one’s future self” (112). This can backfire though; as the future self (even in rebirth) could potentially be me and, like before, I am just focusing on my own suffering. Śāntideva must rely on an appeal to a reductionist Abhidharma view of the person in order to avoid conflict. In addition Śāntideva slips in an unjustified claim that pain is intrinsically bad. Walden believes though that Śāntideva should be seen, not through a Buddhist lens, but instead via “conventional truth” where there are more standard ideas about self and identity. He is appealing a logic that can be applied to individuals who don’t necessarily follow Buddhism. In this way he constructs a more universal argument about how to prevent suffering.

The problem with all these thinkers is still that “even if we know what morality is and requires (compassion), we still do not necessarily know which of those results should be considered the most compassionate” (129). Both Zhu and Śāntideva view training as a way around this problem. Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō proposes an alternative, based upon an articulation of reality that “was never split in the first place” (133). For Nishida, Will, feeling and thinking are different arcs under the same unified activity that generates everything. Only pure experience here becomes central in understanding this unified everything.

Inspired somewhat by radical empiricism, he believes the starting point of philosophy is experience. Nishida builds up a logical foundation for his belief that this is the basis of philosophy. For Nishida thinking and experience are not two radically different activities but rather different aspects of the same ongoing activity. He then posits his moral theory as one that advocates for the development of the self. This is a somewhat teleological view, that upon initial assessment could be open to criticisms of mere hedonism, or that it doesn’t affect anyone outside oneself. Nishida’s responses to these claims are tied back to his metaphysical unification of reason and desire. Hedonism is avoided by the good being “not a matter of following rational
rules for their own sake, or because of following one’s desires. The good always includes and synthesizes both our rational ideas and our desires” (148). This puts a restriction on our ability to know the good. Since the good is the development of the self, the desire for the good is an internal demand or necessity. The good is the goal of not the conscious mind but of the self: the deepest source of the operation and activity of the consciousness itself. Nishida is merely describing what we are already doing in some sense. This isn’t giving us a standard of what to do; instead it’s showing us what we are already doing. In a sense this is fitting a metaphysical justification for how one weighs the pros and cons of a situation, effectively giving a validated voice to the various factors we utilize in choosing a moral action.

Review and Critique

At the outset of the chapter on Nishida, there is a very strong sense that a conclusion should follow to try and wrap up and make sense of what we have just read. Unfortunately there is no conclusion included in this edition of the book and as such, it becomes a bit of a challenge on the reader to make sense of the contents of these previous 5 chapters. In a way this lack of a conclusion is somewhat symbolic of some of my reservations about this particular project. Like the lack of conclusion the work doesn’t attempt to put a fine point on this debates regarding the issues it’s dealing with. The work ultimately draws interesting connections between the thinkers present, however I think it fails to grapple with some of the bigger issues facing both comparative philosophy and the problem of the standard.

The absence of a conclusion could potentially be linked to Walden’s earlier assertion that he is only claiming to attempt to clarify the problem of the standard. The apprehension to put forth a solid claim about what we should be doing in regards to moral thinking is a valid position to take. Unfortunately this assertion seems somewhat inconsistent with the contents of this book. While Walden is claiming that he is merely examining the problem, his selection of only thinkers that prescribe compassion seems to be an implicit sort of positive argument. While maybe not going so far as to lay out the specifics of the philosophy he is advocating, it seems Walden believes that these sorts of moralities of compassion are where we should set our sights. Perhaps this interpretation is relying a little heavily on my own sorts of conclusions of the project, however without a final section to this book, Walden’s work is inviting this sort of speculation. There is a sense that, had a conclusion been included, Walden would begin to put forward what he would believe would be the ideal compassion based system.

Assuming Walden does have some dedication to compassion-based philosophies, it would have been helpful to see how such approaches would rub up against a philosophy outside of this viewpoint. Had Walden put forth a chapter on a thinker who perhaps fell more towards one of the extremes of his established spectrum of Zhuangzi’s moral skepticism to fully faith-based system, he might have ultimately built up a stronger case for a compassion-based moral system. The inclusion of a thinker looking purely to God for moral correctness could have productive counterpoint to these philosophies of human compassion. Although briefly explored in the opening chapter of this book, having a full chapter on the pros and cons of a faith-based morality would have been an interesting addition to this work. And perhaps would give the reader a stronger sense of friction between the thinkers put forward. Ultimately such friction and
conflict could be beneficial in pushing this book to have a more unified argument, rather than exist as an exploration.

The other pressing point that is missed is the lack of any sort of reckoning with the disparate metaphysical schemes that are put forward. Again this sort of criticism is somewhat protected against in Walden’s claim that this book is not trying to synthesize any sort of new philosophical doctrine to follow. But for the sake of argument let’s assume that again there is a sort of implicit argument for adoption of a compassion-based morality.

The methodology of this book has one thinker “picking up the pieces” so to say where a problem arises in another thinker’s philosophy. For example the Śāntideva chapter begins with a description of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view that “humans have the option to act morally, but they will have no particular motivation to do so” (102). The proceeding chapter then goes on to show how Śāntideva’s Buddhist worldview and understanding of nature provide a suitable counter to this argument. In this way it seems that Śāntideva acts as the solution to this problem of unmotivated moral action. The problem I have here is somewhat about how such an exploration could be applied practicality. Say for example I have personally arrived at the same pessimistic conclusion as Schopenhauer. I personally subscribe to his beliefs and metaphysical frameworks that lead to those beliefs, yet I find myself perturbed with this pessimistic conclusion about morality that I have arrived at. In the search for intrinsically justifiable view on morality I come across Śāntideva’s work. Strongly identifying with his belief that moral action should in fact be have be a self motivating process, I hope to import this viewpoint into my own philosophy. This is where I run into a problem; I am not a Buddhist, and I truly believe in Schopenhauer’s metaphysical framework of the Will, Ideas etc. Is there a way in which I can implant just this aspect of Śāntideva’s philosophy that I identify with, or do I need to fully adopt a Buddhist metaphysical framework, or is there something in between these extremes?

My hypothetical example here is meant to open up what is perhaps one of the more pressing issues of comparative philosophy. The problem of how to reconcile two opposed (not so much in conflict but perhaps incommensurable) metaphysical schemes to arrive at a better philosophy is a murky area. The responses that attempt to reconcile this problem range in scope and effectiveness. One potential answer is to modify your existing interpretation of a philosophy to include the newly found concept. In a way this somewhat seems like working backwards from a desired quality and subsequently reconstructing the premises necessary to justify the claim. An example of this kind of philosophical reconstruction can be found in Joseph Chan’s Confucian Perfectionism. In an attempt to make Confucianism more fit for the modern world, Chan looks to introduce a conception of individual autonomy. In order to justify this large shift from classical interpretations of Confucianism, Chan ironically calls upon classical Confucian passages to strengthen the legitimacy of his project. Citing a passage where Confucius accepts the changing of materials in a ceremonial cap, Chan asserts a Confucian attitude would want one to “ adopt a reflective moral attitude and examine the ethical reason behind a rite to determine whether that rite is appropriate” and “second, rites can and should change if the circumstances change” (Chan, 139). While perhaps this example does not explicitly show an individual attempting to bend a metaphysical framework for a new moral scheme, it does provide a potential way we can incorporate a new idea into an older philosophy.

34 See Anthony Barker’s chapter in this volume.
A potential danger with this type of justification, however, is the possibility of manipulating texts and frameworks that are being drawn on. When a specific goal is on the table, a philosopher may find bending and stretching interpretations may be the only way of getting to a desired result. This would be like a scientist ignoring or manipulating their raw data in order to stay in line with an initial hypothesis. Obviously this is a problem.

Another possible solution to this problem that could be explored is to adopt a less strict standard of logical consistency in our practices. While perhaps not a wholly advisable practice there may be specific cases where we can act outside the rationale of our adopted framework and instead act according to another. This is a particularly difficult notion as it involves a three-step process. First one must identify what sort of metaphysical framework they subscribe to. Following that they must identify and accept the validity of a second metaphysical framework. Third, one must temporarily step into that new metaphysical framework and act in accordance with it.

A possible problem with this method is that it makes metaphysics a somewhat a flippant thing. This could become problematic in cases where there is a deeply held belief. For instance believing in the existence of God may not be the type of thing someone can temporarily “turn-off,” in order to try another sort of justification for a set of actions. There is also the issue here of having a single human act in ways that are contradictory with previous or future actions. Although, contradictory action has been witnessed in humans since Plato and his articulation of the tripartite soul, so this issue may not be a deal breaker. Perhaps a more fluid sort of basis of philosophical and moral decision-making could be viable; this notion might not be wholly satisfying though because like Nishida’s moral viewpoint, this maybe be more of a description of what’s going on than an actual solution.

The last sort of solution to this issue could be simply trying to articulate a new metaphysical framework. This is admittedly a daunting and somewhat experimental suggestion, and Walden certainly cannot be faulted for not attempting to invent a new metaphysical system. Envisioning of a new view of the principle of all things that better articulates and solves the problems of current metaphysical schemes is a rather difficult thing to envision. This is somewhat akin to trying to predict what a future paradigm shift will be from inside of a current paradigm. While it may be impossible to envision what a new sort of metaphysics will look like, the development and articulations of past schemes, provide a sort of evidence that new conceptions and organizations of reality will inevitably pop up. The disparities of the metaphysical views of the thinkers in this book provide evidence of this type of development as well.

In some ways this solution is also a call to arms for continued work in philosophy. In order to have new metaphysical articulations conceived the work of education and dialogue in philosophy needs to be continued. In addition it’s possible that philosophy too needs to be open as well. Further engagement with cross-cultural philosophy, art and writings may be the keys to the next breakthrough. In this way Walden’s book is a somewhat admirable example; by putting these thinkers in an implicit dialogue he is inviting connections he doesn’t make explicit, and forcing readers to engage with thinkers that are likely to be outside one’s viewpoint. In addition
Walden is bringing to light serious reservations we should have regarding each of the thinkers he examines. In this way Walden’s work does effectively take a necessary first step towards developing a new metaphysical framework. It may be the case that in identifying a specific set of metaphysical problems Walden is inviting a metaphysical framework to grapple with them. In a sense Walden has laid out a set of expectations and a series of problems as challenges with which a new metaphysics will have to grapple.

Conclusion

Walden’s work has somewhat left me in a strange state. On the one hand I do commend him on his well-researched and clear assessments of his chosen topics; on the other, I can’t help but feel that this work is unfinished. The absence of a conclusion in this book is, for me, inexcusable. But besides this one real misstep I am left simply wanting more. I would have loved to see what Walden could have done with some of the topics I have brought up above. His clarity of writing and deep well of relevant knowledge would have been a welcome perspective on an open-ended issue. This is perhaps why the limited scope of this book feels like such a missed opportunity. Leaving this greater problem that lives underneath unaddressed is in line with what Walden himself explicitly claims he set out to do. Because of this I can’t be to critical of what the end result is, but unfortunately I can’t claim that it’s an essential work in the field of metaphysics or ethics either.
Civil Citizenry: The First and Last Line of Defense for Democratic Institutions


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In terms of a general methodology, Chan chooses to place modern limits on a perfectionist doctrine, but at no stage waters down the original Confucian philosophy he staunchly supports. He subtracts age-inappropriate recommendations, which is supposed to give what remains added impact. At the macro level there are two critical argumentative moves he makes to achieve canonical faithfulness while gaining utility and answerability to unprecedented societal conditions. One is strategically defensive, while the other is offensive; they each do an equal amount of work in backing his overall argument: the compatibility of Confucianism with democratic institutions in a way that strengthens the purchase of democracy by normatively charging its social impact.

One of the overarching arguments employed by Chan can be construed as a strategy of judicious ‘internal revision’, whereby Confucian views are shown to be welcoming towards substantial, but limited, formal liberties consistent with personal autonomy. Traditionalist governments can *assent* to these rights on the basis that current societies are so diffuse, hectic, and demanding from a subjective-judgment perspective as to preclude interference in private sphere activity that has until the technological era been largely peripheral (as we enjoyed less leisure, lower disposable incomes, and had shorter lives more bound to employment.) Granting autonomy is thus seen as instrumentally valuable in dealing with the breadth of decision-making modern man faces; modern liberties related to ‘freedom of action and expression’ (168) (presumably things like labour mobility and an unmuzzled press) deserve legal recognition insofar as man is not at home in this age without them, and cannot make sense of moral autonomy absent room for preference or possible error in judgement. Tradition, unadapted, would be a micromanaging imposition, and so a source of harassment when not a necessary evil. It remains questionable, at the same time, whether Confucians would entertain the concept of something that was both necessary and evil. Instead, reduced state involvement might be properly *desirable* on a case-by-case basis. Case-by-case limitation of power would not shorten the reach of government widely, and would therefore be in keeping with a high measure of state discretion.

This release of control (in one respect, a *depoliticisation* of human behaviour) is not just a figurative nod to the growing complexity of our lives - a justified ‘concession’ Confucius himself might make. It is also a corollary of Chan’s position that ‘reflective engagement’ (49) is a necessary component of moral autonomy, in that the sincerity and weightiness of moral

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responsibility will not be brought to bear at the individual-level if the source of virtue is a closed or highly circumscribed learning environment. This is because superficiality of ethical ‘know-how’ will persist in environments generating insufficient temptation to test our practical knowledge (whether we can rectify our minds to produce righteous intentions.) This is an unquestionably Confucian truism about the bluntness of rules, and its argumentative centrality testifies to the fact that Chan emphasises accessible interpretation in his work. Clearly, virtuous character does not arise from habituation and circumscription alone. Moral understanding exceeds ‘voluntary endorsement’ (149) of ethical behaviour, the motivation for which can be thin, coincidental and/or overemphasised with regards to outcomes. After all, morality is not universally achieved in reality, and so we should not act as if remonstration or stronger incentivisation will reliably affect weak minds. In the simplest possible terms, there are people who don’t know what’s good for them, or which way is up, and so they need to be forced, despite the fact that morality has a high intellectual component. These facts do not actually conflict - a point Chan is at pains to make throughout the book.

The deliberative requirement of morality is illustrated in deficient cases where it is either easier or preferential to be moral (or too socially costly or draining to be ‘wicked’ or ‘dissolute’), where moral behaviour is a product of groupthink, where we possess little more than moral predisposition, or where moral behaviour is all that we venture (the result of severe discipline or fear.) A generalised reflective ‘blindness’ (149) is potentially compounded by treating morality in terms of individual endorsement - a notion which might confuse us as to the functional roles of obedience and hierarchy in preserving the institutional stability that underpins material requirements for higher-order thoughts to take hold (the establishment of ‘ideal conditions’ (156) leading to tangible benevolence beginning with the sagely.)

By pointing out the cognitive hazards of mere endorsement and so the compensatory role of reflection, Chan effectively underscores the unacceptable minimalism of voluntary endorsement as a standard for moral autonomy. The result of this deficiency is that reflective engagement must additionally be a component of virtue. As Chan writes in Chapter 6: ‘Rites as norms of conduct are often too general to give precise guidance on how to make concrete moral decisions in particular circumstances. Situations arise that are unique and without precedent, as well as borderline and complex - in which certain rites conflict with others - and these call for reflective judgement and moral discretion.’ (156). Although Chan is referring more exclusively to discretion in moral autonomy, it is hard to contain this flexibility and responsiveness to moral matters, and not extend it to self-regarding behaviours that are both non-harmful and, at worst, indirectly material to our moral life, which includes the maintenance of key relationship patterns (father-son, husband-wife, ruler-subject, and their various analogs.) It seems legal requirements to engage in anachronous ritual practices or relationship fashioning would cause inconvenience and perceived intransigence to social progress (for instance, relying on the most orthodox interpretations of the ‘Five Relationships’ to reform family law, or holding people back professionally based on age or sex.) We imagine that modern developments in the areas of ‘love marriage’, financial independence, and vocational openness would stand as changes refined rather than rejected according to Chan’s interpretation. This is to say his reading of Confucian flexibility in civil and political liberties has run-on effects for tolerating autonomy in areas of human activity that have more claim to moral neutrality, or represent empirical trends of the new
historic episode too common to be resisted by the average citizen (e.g. certain popular traditions and aspects of consumer culture.)

Chan’s argument surrounding autonomy cleverly, but honestly, takes the form of an admission that governments, and figures of control more generally, cannot only not keep up with the diversity of individual choices required on a daily basis, but are also not in a position to decide how individuals should choose in the face of competing responsibilities, which are either novel or have persisted into our increasingly convoluted minefield of a world (e.g. morphed tokens of filial piety, parenthood, ritual.) Fulfilment of our family duties can take place in multiple settings with equivalent expressions, and we can have personal choice the effects of which do not dilute our social bonds. Consequently, the state is not warranted in meddling with the precise format of our nearest affairs, like what variety of media sources we consume, how we allocate our disposable income, what kind of insurance policies we take out, what hobbies or interests we pursue, or whether we support public, private or charter schools. These are just a few areas where we can be left to our own devices in terms of achieving mutually understood responsibilities; provided citizens broadly see education, financial solvency, and family obligation as paramount, then there is latitude for means and expression, and toleration for some margin of error. No one can make clear-cut recommendations in these areas without causing undue burden, let alone make reliable statements about the Confucian perspective recalibrated for the present. Assuming that Confucian emphases are broadly achieved across these life aspects, deviation at the procedural level can be magnanimously overlooked.

As Chan states clearly in the introduction, ‘...a highly restrictive or oppressive moral environment is harmful to the development of a genuine moral life. However, traditional Confucian moral autonomy is compatible with only a narrow range of life choices. To cope with the demands of a fast-changing, pluralistic society, Confucian ethics should incorporate a moderate notion of personal autonomy in the wider sense that people should have the freedom to form life goals and chart a personal path of life’ (37) What has been launched thus far is a defensive argumentative strategy, in that Confucianism is able to subject itself to revision in light of generational shifts that would make traditional doctrine excessively onerous were it to confront every practice symbolically opposed to its conservatism and ritualistic attention to detail. The underlying idea is that the core Confucian thrust need not be altered to accommodate the expanding horizons of human activity, because drawing people into the Confucian way is about exposing them to the charismatic virtue of moral leadership, which is an edifying persuasive force. A philosophy that goes about persuasion via intellectually and psychologically penetrating means would experience internal conflict espousing a set of obligations too strict for the historical period, as their unenthusiastic reception would necessitate compliance via coercive means from the off. This would be akin to leading people into a trap, and so would not be in keeping with the spirit of Confucianism, as compulsion is always the last resort in cases where sublimation and remonstration fail to change damaging behaviours. A quote from Mengzi illustrates this point: ‘When there are benevolent persons in positions of authority, how is it possible for them to trap the people?’36 Not only is this ‘entrapment’ (latent or ‘brewing’, rather than figurative) wrong-headed, it is also insecure and redundant, given that ‘the people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards, or as animals head for the wilds.’37 To reject this to

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36 Mengzi 1A:7; see Mengzi 2008, 14.
37 Mengzi 4A:9; see Mengzi 2008, 94.
say that the moral influence of the sage in *not* central to the Confucian project, and/or that punishment is just a deterministic tool used to steer people not accountable for their decisions. Such a pessimistic setup sends a loud and clear message to the ruled: not much is expected of you, except that you will do your best to work around the system.

A clash of this kind permits Chan to say that freedom of choice can and *must* be significantly expanded, so as to ensure Confucian goals are pursued in keeping with gentlemanly methods. This consistency might be said to reflect the ‘unity of knowledge and action’ espoused by Wang Yangming, in that the *methodology* of rule enforcement, which moulds private sphere attitudes, is ultimately inseparable from its results, at least in the event that harmony within the state is lasting, and so emanates from the hearts of the converted (aka the well-ruled.) Conversion to a way of life not in conflict with the law is equally about the law *and* its perceived mode of application - a point which is mirrored by Chan’s observation that voting (the *naked* right or law) ought to be *treated as* having affirmational force through the ‘selection’ (83) of candidates, versus threatening force through sanction (non-selection or ‘reward’ via re-election.) The latter, through crudely functional, is a barren conception of what voting means, as it does not imply support that will weather the storms of misfortune and misunderstanding between ruler and subject. If there is not a gritty foundation of occasional sacrifice, tolerance, and faith in mission, then rulers will act as if wary of a capricious underclass that has no abiding allegiance or sufferance for long-term vision. If there is no sense of yielding approval issuing from beneath, the ruled will be dealt with as a thermostatic mass whose activation switch can be tempered by promises, or stealthier populism (like cheap money.) This dim and dim-witted view of the citizens is to be remedied by thickening the moral parameters of participation in the law.

It is in this domain that Confucianism can add positive charge to democracy. Societies with freedoms contingently, or indirectly, at odds with their communally stated values have the most to learn in this area. For example, those Western countries nominally undergoing austerity, but where gambling, high-margin financial trading and low savings rates go uncorrected as a matter of respecting personal choice and dynamism. Thanks to Chan’s expositional revamp, Confucianism has made enough concessions to generation-specific anomalies, and gained sufficient historical self-awareness, to unapologetically throw its weight around, and make changes in such areas. In other words, the political practice is stripped down to its dense core, allowing the ruling body to dispense with regret and hesitation. The task is now to showcase why the glaring punctures in the ideology of liberal democracy makes self-censure and wholehearted revision a non-option for Westerners witness to the stagnation of their political institutions. Such stagnation is evident in growing political extremism that has characterised the US presidential elections, increasing the chance of a moderate candidate being elected for the wrong reasons (the less representative lesser evil who does not jeopardise stability.) If we accept that such outcomes do not represent genuine public *affirmation* of candidates (the selection function), then we ought to reconsider what the actual objective of our popular sovereignty is. Surely it is to select from among *quality* candidates who will have real impact, rather than side with generic *figures* who will be more or less conducive to a positive investment climate. The latter is just too low a goal. In order to tackle career-driven money politics, we need to head off moral disunity in its developmental stages, so that *people* are our ‘fallback apparatus,’ (38) rather than checks and balances and separation of powers forming the fallback apparatus for the naturally wayward people. This is to apply Chan’s notion of human rights as a fallback mechanism to the selection
of government personnel. Again, this arrangement sends the pessimistic message that people are risks to be accounted for, rather than *perfectable* entities (a critical term for Chan.) That is not to say we need things the other way around (removal of all institutional constraints on politicians); it’s to say we need both, but in favour of increased government clout. It is only when the sagely and materially disinterested (though satisfied) take the reins of power that we can reap the benefits of democratic institutions, because it is not enough that all decent, non-egotistical politicians are not ‘crowded out,’\(^38\) as legislative power in democracies is about numbers! To enliven the point, if the same individuals who clamoured for democracy were reborn and had the privilege of living under its current incarnation, they would be aghast at our disunity and pettiness, and wonder why we had not used this system to harmonize private practices with public-mindedness in a way that made us socially accountable without rendering us slaves to the law. The answer we might offer those martyrs is that we are insufficiently instructed in the burden of freedom, and so use democracy more often as vehicle for rights claims, corporate advancement and self-preservation, rather than as a system that can produce laws complementing our freedoms by clarifying and restraining them.

In light of this, and to avoid failure at the systemic level, people must be taught to hold in esteem the lessons of the past, to recognise seniority as accrued through experience and merit, and to see that individual sacrifice is not infrequently justified by joint progress and the wider goal of harmony. If this means endorsing an authoritarian core curriculum in schools, appointing conservative magistrates and court judges, or reducing rights that induce high levels of litigation or entitlement claims, then this is permissible when citizens repeatedly fail to secure productive compromise, or are too unfamiliar with politics, current events and institutional mechanisms to be intelligently interdependent on each other in public life. In fact, this is one rational response when we lack a sense of shared interest and mutual benevolence. On further reflection, it is not that radical a position. It just seems radical, because we’ve become accustomed to the difficulty of implementing good sense. In vital democracy, choice must be deep in following the law, changing the law, and enthroning its enforcers; this is a strict but not wildly ambitious proviso for participants. In this vein, Chan’s idea of resilient democracy ‘does not include a commitment to political equality as a principle of political morality. It does not attempt to vindicate the vague, but commonly expressed, idea that in a democracy all citizens should have an equal say in politics.’\(^39\)

If citizens are to have extensive political rights on an equal footing, and can come to occupy posts in government, then they should at least be educated enough to relate and ‘sell’ their interests (not just iterate them), and should be in possession of a proximate moral vocabulary complemented by an empathetic baseline, in order to establish common ground that enables resolution. Similarly they should see themselves as dignified holders of rights, recognising that state capacity to make good on various entitlements is dependent on ideal conditions and the concurrent efforts of citizens to fill gaps in the economic safety net (sharing the burden.) They should also recognise the possibility of being intellectually ‘outgunned’ or subordinated by seasoned experts. While this is to some degree an exclusionary revision of politics and rights talk, notice that the pursuit of effective, harmonious government is not a requirement of always seeing eye-to-eye, or an insistence that politics is comprehensible by the

\(^{38}\) Frey 1997.

\(^{39}\) Wall 2014.
erudite only. It is not a repressive crackdown on dissent, as Confucianism actually invites newcomers to guide us out of stalemate and confusion. Such flexibility is part and parcel of classic humility and implied by the historical adaptability of itinerant Confucian political consultants. These added criteria are actually standards of sociability that help us overcome vulgar realpolitik, and bring political cooperation to a plane beyond temporary allegiances and shared obstacles. That there are educated people in government who cannot surpass scheming - the presence of which merely hardens the tactics used in negotiations - shows that the ideal government makeup is not technocratic personnel, as sustained cooperation between institutionally antagonistic parties calls for a pronounced ethical component. This ethical component is observable in attunement to social cues and other forms of emotional intelligence. Civility and a few charismatic political personalities aren’t going to overcome purposeful entrenchment, game theorising or nihilism. Leaders ought to know, better than other citizens, how to bring people together, and when to put profit and small-mindedness behind them. Given these criteria, they should be aware of when to agree to disagree, when to dismiss differences as trivial, when to make unspoken concessions as lubricative gestures, when to forgive past grievances, when to act in hope, when to give up on opposition, and when to defer to their superiors. If representatives emerging from the citizen body via the democratic process do not have these social, and politically intertwined skills, they aren’t up to the job, as they cannot build bridges (over themselves.) Identifying the persistence of proudful and calculated standoffs can lead us, from an unprejudiced position, to make political rights unequal, and to grant executive power to those more sensitive, observant and cultivated individuals, who would not have it that we lament our faith in them. What choice have we but faith in the ruling parties, after all? Such a question has mental weight for a sagely leader, but is a humorous rhetorical or side point for small-minded politicians seeking to extract from the ‘dominium’ (45).

In view of this, accompanying the recognition that government is in service of the people (a service conception of governance is consonant with a ‘legitimate right to rule’ (67) within a jurisdiction - an ‘imperium,’ as Chan labels it), sagely leaders recognise ‘authoritative political relation is marked by a mutual commitment on both sides - the rulers are committed to serve the people and the ruled willingly submit.... Trust and voluntary submission of the people thus plays an important part in constituting authority’ (210). The Confucian argument for expanding individual autonomy comes full circle when it is shown that selective allowances (at least in the form of ‘civil and political rights’ (131)) actually shore up the pre-existing legitimacy of the state by demonstrating it can be sensitive to the historically specific demands of the ruled. The government acknowledges that its authority is never in question, so long as it recognises: first, the ‘sufficiency principle’ (178) of paternalism is subject to need-inflation (as citizens move up the Maslovian pyramid and encounter existential development); and second, that shared values amounting to decision-making efficiency are not the lone goal of a healthy paternalism. The first point is related to the second, since in democratic countries where the sufficiency principle is satisfied for both political winner and losers (the majority and minority), willingness to participate in the political system will hinge on the selection of candidates who can do more than satisfy economic needs. Even with the successful generation of shared norms facilitating a functional democracy (an ideal political scenario), social values diversify and entitlements burgeon when economies make significant shifts. Individual choice inevitably gains paramount as countries gain wealth, and this form of need-inflation will work against the sufficiency principle unless curbed by paternalism that reinforces core values of the past, and puts
autonomous choice in perspective. Confucianism thus has a continuing role in informing democracy.

As far as our personal choice goes, limited government is now, practically speaking, a reality because vast extensions of our private lives are beyond the scope of control. We possess online, corporate, consumer and other growing identities that are not amenable to external influences designed to gear the productive and/or private aspects of our lives towards communal responsibility and shared values. In terms of an obedience climate, we are certainly in ‘nonideal’ territory, to use Chan’s language (5). Having effectively designated entire domains of human activity ‘apolitical’ (rather than less political), or as self-regarding and contained (and so legitimately beyond coercion), we have unfortunately not made corresponding intellectual progress with regards to how self-policing of the private sphere is actually made possible. Although we are declared supporters of negative freedom, many of us have failed to draw the link between well-run private life at the individual level (that involving the least negative externalities, and the most personal development) and the conscientious maturity which might stand in for a centralised form of supervision or law-giving equivalent in the private domain. As Chan describes with a plainness that is scathing: ‘...if sovereignty is understood as a dominium, the people as the dominus have the right to use their property (jurisdictional powers and territory) as they please - including to dispose of it in a wasteful way, to use it in a way harmful to themselves, and to destroy it, or to give it to others. What they may do may be folly or hurtful to themselves; nevertheless they have a right to do so. A dominium implies a right to do wrong to themselves’ (51). Chan is at all times against governance, including self-governance, predicated on a brute notion of ownership.

Ironically, we acknowledge that badly-run private life has knock-on political effects, but cling to theoretical, sometimes even pre-social, defenses of why we ought to have broad liberties and economic entitlements - entitlements we know, in truth, lead many of us to have disorderly lives which are not only morally impoverished, but at odds with institutional structures that depend on the quality and commitment of citizenry (for instance, a self-seeking outlook does not promote the selection of upright candidates, nor an equitable contribution of tax.) This is because our defense of private sphere behaviour is simply not matched by defense mechanisms which limit the contagion of individual irresponsibility or the disparity of moral precepts, so we are far more likely to be flung into institutional chaos that merely reflects cognitive disorder at the level of the group and/or individual. We have not thus far succeeded in making our citizens an enduring line of defense for democratic institutions; they lack the prerequisite mental caliber for democratic participation. This is not some unfair criticism of the ill-educated or underprivileged - it is an acknowledgement of the need for greater direction at all levels of society. It merely includes the reasonable assumption that the well-educated (education having less to do with economically prized skill sets) and privileged are better positioned (not determined) to live virtuously, as they haven’t the same material pressures impinging on their worldview, and hence they are more culpable for the same crimes. Differentiated culpability is not well captured in modern rights talk or law.

The current political discord is tantamount to a root educational failure, whereby individuals have not been versed in similarly expressive customs and standards, and so do not

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40 Rawls 1999, in reference to drawing up rights from behind a ‘veil of ignorance.’
share commensurable normative frameworks. Groups of such ‘spiritually’ hindered individuals will rarely succeed in self-limiting the range of accepted disagreement, and will seldom express disagreement in such a way as to maintain the quality of respect needed to make dignified remonstration an absolute basic of political dialogue. If such elementary cohesion is not achieved in the upper echelons of society, it is unlikely that a dense moral core will be imputed as standing behind the myriad disagreements of the ruling class. This predicament can confound us as to the predicted trajectory of policy, which in turn has a deep effect on our confidence in the government to make decisions. If there are no default values discernible in shifting in policies that would, from a third party perspective, form the substantive basis for overcoming interior political divisions, then how are we to believe government when it says it backs something entirely, or that it has control over its members (at least on pressing national issues.) For this reason, constitutional constraints are not enough, for the simple and observable reason that western democratic constitutions have recently encountered severe political gridlock, but no constitutional article has been able to remedy the ensuing shutdowns. To stress the point, the character of democratic government has undergone substantial transformation, but the civil, supposedly impartialising, documents standing behind them have not. Constitutions may be enlightened, but they mean little as foundational directives if unable to command overwhelming adherence.

Following from this, and counter to our intuitions, impartiality in the form of constitutionalism is not an assurance in the league of partiality. While impartial administration is indispensable insofar as individuals do not fear a rigged system, impartiality it is not binding to very concrete objectives, other than perhaps anti-corruption or a vague notion of fairness. Arguably preferable to this detached view is consistent partiality not so extreme as to be flagrant. In fact, pessimism about the existence of partiality or spine in government can lead to negative consequences such as enhanced volatility of markets based on uncertainty about the level of commitment to key mission statements. Ipso facto, intelligent investors and political scientists take official statements with a large pinch of salt, and look at behind-the-scenes intrigue as a better indicator of why decisions were and will be made. In a strange way, partiality is the basis of integrity, because partiality sets the precedent for future gambles, and does not have to be whimsical or capricious; it can just take the form of a recurring ideological bent. It is actually assuring to know the government has an emotional position, and that it founds its policies on genuine convictions forming a loose character. Besides, that is only a pressing legitimacy issue for some fraction of the educated population where the ‘sufficiency principle’ of economic need has been satisfied. Most people just desire stable conditions. Perhaps the state as a kind of ‘known force’, within limits, can be granted autocratic powers of coercion, on the basis that individuals quickly learn to adjust, and to step out of the way. While stringent and absolutely decided on some issues, at least this vision of ruler-ruled relationship keeps individuals from becoming sudden and unexpected victims of the state - those who had been safe or ‘welcome’ until x-point in time before hidden extremism took advantage of sufficient disunity, or before political stagnation caused regular politicians to abruptly depart from their former values. A spineless, personality-resistant government can more readily ‘shape-shift’ in this manner.

Even in less extreme scenarios, failure to generate a reliable moral referent via educational and other authoritarian means increases the likelihood and severity of fallout arising from conflicts of personal interest, and makes us ill-prepared to engage in fruitful political life
because empathy and understanding is less forthcoming. For instance, in societies where deference, decorum and moderation in criticism are not uniformly esteemed, political disputes can descend into retrenchment, character assassination and one-upmanship thought to garner popularity, all the while superficializing debate and cheapening public life.

It is just this kind of vulgarity and lack of direction that suggests we are missing the requisite top-down guidance to rectify the normative deviations standing in the way of shared progress, both material and inner. On the back of penetrating criticisms related to the decline of political culture and morality (corroborated by a ‘growing disenchantment with partisan politics’), Chan is able to propose Confucianism as a bonafide solution to the real-world predicament of law unable to check behaviour, owing to civic underpinnings too weak for the task. He wants to endow participatory democracy with a discourse of cooperation and concern, which is a loftier goal involving optimism about candidates. This is why he says: ‘democratic institutions modeled on the knavery principle would likely attract more people with low civic virtue to enter politics than altruistic people because they would find it less demeaning to operate in such a setting. As Adrian Vermeule puts it, “designing institutions for knaves creates a system in which knaves operate comfortably, while knights decline to take public office.” The end result is of course a ‘vicious circle in which bad politicians...dominate the political scene because of the self-fulfilling effects of the system, and the public (is) forced to invest more resources and create more rules to monitor them’ (89). As the political culture deteriorates, ‘pronouncements of good intentions and displays of good behavior (come to be) looked at with suspicion or mockery by those who subscribe to the sanctions model, and good politicians (are) made to follow the rules and norms that assume they are knaves’ (89).

Accordingly, it is the Confucian contribution of ‘thick parameters’ to govern social and political life that Chan identifies as complementary to democratic institutions; this is all the more apparent once his defense of Confucianism as a philosophy able to entertain civil liberties and personal autonomy is complete. Thickened social parameters put together by a strengthened executive are the counterbalance to misalignments between the essential priorities of citizens, and so avert a breakdown of productive political relations. These ethical dimensions proscribing freedom stop disagreements concerning private sphere activity from all being trivialised, and thus defended, by retreating to the argument that priority divergence is a naturally occurring phenomenon, rather than the partial failure of exclusively civic education to make us see what needs we have in common, what actions undermine our collective good, and how depoliticisation is often borne of convenience.

As a criticism of democratic institutions coupled with ‘popular liberal philosophical packages’ (35), being at frequent cross-currents is too often explained by our unique individuality and varying ambitions, even when we know it is equally possible specific disagreements might have been avoided had we the social agency and governmental reach to shape the minds of the ruled. Again, we have an unhelpful predisposition to see mind influence as sinister propagandising that dulls thought, rather than as a noble project of expanding the central region of the mental Venn diagram to the point where we become culturally viable. It is

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41 Pharr and Putnam 2000, 18.
42 Vermeule 2003, 42.
43 Metzger 2005.
appealing to conclude that generally unified positions (for instance, on fiscal responsibility, or
the institution of marriage) might make our our elections more efficient by not allowing the vote
to ‘eaten up’ by otherwise respectable candidates who divide loyalties (and therefore destroy
their own electability) by holding fringe views that alienate too much of the electorate. This is a
material example of the burden of choice, and unfettered autonomy more generally. Were there
to be hard societal limits on the range of acceptable opinion, this would not pose such a problem.
If there were fewer candidates with extreme views, we might be able to mount more than a two-
horse-race.

We know that phenomena like debt, divorce, dependency and loneliness are all hallmarks
of our unbound freedom, but we’d rather risk those contingent outcomes than suffer the privacy
intrusions reminiscent of our shackled, feudal past. Despite our intuitive awareness that negative
freedom needs some degree of rescuing from itself, in the West we shelter our private sphere
from positive laws and regulative social forces that would actually enhance our enjoyment of
those same freedoms. Freedom to choose remains paramount, even though we know that uncoordinated choice results in our neglecting the interests of our families and neighbours, thus
making people even less connected to our families and neighbours responsible for their well-
being in the long-run (the realised externality.) For instance, the pressing need for a single-parent
to work a great distance from home, when their home is already remote from the grandparents’
location, creates nonideal conditions leading to a suboptimal transfer of responsibility. Governments must use pooled resources to provide third parties services to make up for care that is sacrificed in the breakdown of the family unit. Such costs (social and economic) arising from aggravated societal complexity and disregard for custom could well be headed off by a restriction of autonomy such that social obligations were hardened and localised. Chan gives the example of Mainland Chinese children who can be forced into financial settlements with their parents if they neglect the recognised principle of supporting the elderly.

In conclusion, Chan convincingly argues that the ‘liberal notion of individual autonomy’
(147) has led us to be so wary of non-secular, ‘comprehensive doctrines’44 that we, at great
personal cost, dismiss authoritarian conceptions of how to run our lives that might remedy our
needless disillusionment with the democratic system. This psychological state of paranoia -
where we lump the paternalistic with the tyrannical and ideologically suspect - is an active
impediment to our democracy developing a normative spine that renders it finally superior to the
systems it was destined to replace. As the burden of choice has grown, so has the need for
mindfulness about the way our exemptions from conformity and classical duties have hindered
the social fabric on which functioning democracy is predicated.

44 Rawls 1996.
Could Early Confucian Family Values Help Contemporary Western Society?


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The argument of Cline’s book is that our contemporary western society should adopt early Confucian ideas about the importance of early childhood moral cultivation and parent-child relationships. To make this argument, over the course of the book she must do three things. She must convince us that the early Confucians actually held these beliefs about early childhood, she must prove that these ideas are distinct from any tradition in the west, and she must show that our contemporary western culture would benefit from adopting these views of early childhood. The book is organized to achieve these goals. Ultimately, I was persuaded by Cline’s argument that western society could benefit from increased focus on early childhood and parent-child relationships. However, I’m not fully convinced that by the place Confucianism plays in her argument. Among other things, she validates the majority of her claims about Confucianism that she wants us to take seriously with contemporary western ideas of science and feminism. This leads me to think that contemporary western science and feminism alone are capable of creating the change Cline argues for, and while Confucianism can certainly be a source of inspiration, its centrality in Cline’s project is unnecessary, and at times works against her.

Summary

The first two chapters dig into different early Confucian texts to show that, despite it not getting much attention from academia, Confucians did have strong views on parent-child relationships, early childhood, and how they affect society at large. The first chapter describes early Confucian moral cultivation in general, specifically the roles of filial piety and family relationships, in the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*, the three primary Confucian texts of the Warring States period. This chapter mainly serves to set up the way the early Confucians talked about these basic topics.

Chapter 2 aims to show the early Confucians were talking about the importance early childhood and parent-child relationships, not just general family relationships. Cline admits that Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi have little to say explicitly on the topic, but makes the argument that “although moral cultivation during childhood is certainly not the main focus of these texts, there are a number of passages demonstrating the writers’ assumption that the matter is important” (43). It’s true that Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi make practically no mention of early childhood—the few passages involving children or youth at all are undoubtedly referring to children well over the age of three. So the useful and interesting work happens in the later sections of the chapter that draw on other early Confucian texts, namely, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Rites*, *Discourse on the States*, *Collected Biographies of Women*, and *Protecting and Tutoring*. These
texts have much more explicit things to say about early childhood and even pregnancy, and Cline has more material to not only argue that early childhood was important to early Confucians, but also that it was a “unique and irreplaceable” opportunity for moral cultivation. In calling upon these supplementary texts, she relies on a widened definition of “early Confucianism,” one that is somewhat contentious because it pushes what can be coherently assigned to that entity. Cline acknowledges that most scholars separate Han texts from earlier Chinese ones, and even privilege pre-Han texts, but she contends that there is “considerable continuity”(xxi) between the views of the adjacent periods. Ultimately, she is not too concerned about strict definitions demarcating periods, because her focus is to show that the ideas are there. “My aims in this work…are to show that texts from remarkably early periods of the Confucian tradition express an appreciation for the unique connections between parent-child relationships, early childhood, and moral cultivation, and to argue that these views have constructive value for us today” (xxi). Whether the texts she cites are considered “early Confucianism” or just “remarkably early Confucian thought” is beside the point to her.

The third and fourth chapters aim to show that these early Confucian views on early childhood are distinctive, specifically that the same sorts of views don’t exist in the same way historically in our western tradition. Chapter 3 moves methodically through the western philosophical canon, starting in ancient Greece with Plato and Aristotle, then moving to Stoic, Thomistic, and Augustinian philosophers, then Modern philosophers including Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, and Hegel. Unsurprisingly, none of these thinkers give much attention to childhood and the importance of family relationships, and the ones that do don’t talk about childhood moral cultivation in any way similar to the early Confucians. Cline notes that Aquinas, Locke, and Kant all discuss filial piety, and that Locke even discusses the significance of mothers, but she maintains “that the Confucians had not only much more to say about these topics but much more that turns out to be accurate in light of what we know now about the role of parents in the moral development of children” (140).

Whereas Chapter 3 was a straightforward demonstration that traditional western philosophers were lacking in discussing family relationships and moral cultivation, Chapter 4 is a more complex and interesting engagement with contemporary feminist philosophers on the subject. While Cline notes that “even within feminist philosophy, there is not a large body of literature that focuses on the role of parent-child relationships in moral cultivation” (141), she picks out three care ethicists—Sara Ruddick, Nel Noddings, and Virginia Held—who she sees as giving the most attention to the subject. Before going into too much exposition, Cline remarks on a discrepancy between Confucian and western thinkers: that in the west, it took women thinkers to bring family issues to the forefront, while all of the Confucian authors were men. To Cline, this signals that Confucian culture didn’t bracket these topics as ‘women’s issues’ like they appear to be in the west, but they were central and important for everyone.

Cline proceeds to sift through the care ethicists’ work, and points out some important contrasts. One general difference is that the early Confucians didn’t focus primarily on women, but saw important roles for all family members. Additionally, they didn’t give caring or any singular idea precedence like care ethicists do. Engaging with each care ethicist individually, Cline sees Ruddick as uninterested in the Confucian idea of mothers and fathers having distinct complementary contributions to the family. Ruddick also doesn’t give weight to the earliest years
of childhood like the early Confucians did. Cline points out Noddings’ critique of filial piety and ritual propriety. Noddings is dismissive of the idea that all children should show respect and authority to their parents no matter what, and additionally thinks that parents ought to express gratitude to children as well. Cline describes Held in opposition to Confucians because she advocates for continually drawing upon the parent-child relationship to assist reasoning morally, as opposed to the cultivation of a particular virtue like filial piety that would act as the root for the rest of moral development. Held even explicitly critiques Confucianism, saying, “a traditional Confucian ethic, if seen as an ethic of care, would be a form of care ethics unacceptable to feminists” (182). This brings up another contrast—that most contemporary feminists are far more willing to reject traditional ideas and practices. Cline concludes that contemporary care ethics and early Confucianism can push each other in important ways. Feminism could encourage Confucianism to open up more possibilities for women and mothers, while giving fathers more responsibilities in the realm of care work. Confucians could also incorporate Noddings’ idea of parent-child reverence going both ways, encouraging parents to show gratitude towards children and putting less emphasis on the parental contributions. Held’s idea of continually drawing upon parent-child relationships to guide morality could be incorporated into a revised Confucianism as well. Confucianism could in turn inform care ethics by directing attention to the role of pregnancy and early childhood in moral cultivation. Further, early Confucianism offers a broad range of virtues, practices, and capacities that do work in the process of moral cultivation that could supplement care ethicists’ singular focus on care.

Chapter 5 is where Cline brings empirical evidence into the mix to back up early Confucian claims. She spent the prior section of the book showing that Confucian claims are distinctive, but she reminds us that “distinctiveness alone is not a reason to accept a particular set of views” (189). Because her goal is to make real-life practical change, not just examine texts, she must show that we have good reasons to adopt the early Confucian views. Cline claims that many of the Confucian’s ideas about infancy, childhood, and parent-child relationships actually align with scientific evidence. Her main reference is to the Nurse-Family Partnership, a maternal and early childhood home visitation program that has intervened with at-risk families for thirty-seven years in Elmira, NY, Memphis, TN, and Denver, CO. The program’s methods are as follows:

Nurse-Family Partnership nurses are trained to engage clients in activities associated with: (1) improving pregnancy outcomes by helping women to improve prenatal health; (2) improving child health and development by helping parents to provide sensitive and competent caregiving; and (3) improving parental life course and economic self-sufficiency by helping parents to develop plans for the future, including completing their education, finding work, and engaging in family planning (Olds 2006:11-13) (192).

The NFP shows far reaching results, including improved prenatal health, increased father involvement, fewer childhood injuries, fewer unintended pregnancies, reduced drug use, increased academic achievement, and fewer arrests, among many other things. Additionally, savings to government far exceeded the cost of the program. Part of the success of the program lies in its foundation in scientific theory, namely human ecology theory and attachment theory. Human ecology theory addresses the role that the parent’s social context plays in the quality of their parenting, emphasizing the complex effect the environment has. Attachment theory focuses
on the bonds between parents and children and how that impacts a child’s early stages. Although the NFP and the theory around it weren’t founded on Confucian ideals, Cline identifies many places where their missions align. Both indicate belief that prenatal care is a foundation for moral development, that large societal problems have deep origins in family and specifically parent-child relationships, that pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood are unique times to intervene, and that parents have a unique role in shaping their children. Further, they believe in a social nature of cultivating self, opposed to individual emotional and intellectual responses. The success of this program, Cline then argues, proves that early Confucian values could benefit our society.

In the final chapter of the book, Cline suggests the humanities as a tool to link early Confucian values with scientific evidence to make positive social and policy change in our contemporary society. Confucian views, she says, can be a practical and unique resource for making real life positive change. Our problem is that our widespread attitudes, beliefs, and practices don’t line up with the Confucian values that appreciate parent-child relationships and the importance of early childhood. Similarly, our policy doesn’t reflect what’s in our best interest. A salient example Cline gives is that the United States is one of the few countries that doesn’t require paid maternal leave. Since our policy is shaped by our culture, and our culture is shaped by thought, Cline says the best way to address these issues is with the humanities. Stories abound in the Confucian tradition of great fathers and mothers. The stories center their roles as parents—they are not just stories that happen to be about parents. We have few stories like this in the west. In fact, many of our stories revolve around a protagonist who sacrifices their family life to pursue the greater good. Cline argues the Confucians could help us by giving us a rich set of stories and other resources to inform us in shaping our society.

Discussion

I found myself persuaded by Cline’s argument. However, I developed a number of concerns along the way. My primary worry is that the book doesn’t really require the Confucian focus to be convincing, and that centralizing Confucianism may even detract from her practical goals. Many of my other concerns tie back to this initial one. For one, most of the Confucian claims that Cline wants us to take seriously she validates with contemporary western ideas of science and feminism. Additionally, I believe that more examination of western culture beyond a traditional notion of ‘philosophy’ to include religion or psychology would have done better work in achieving her goal of proving Confucian distinctiveness. I also would have liked to hear her discuss the ways that the NFP and Confucianism don’t align, in particular, regarding the early Confucians focus on cultivation of upper-class, influential families, while the NFP is targeted to at-risk families. Finally, a more explicit discussion of the place of filial piety in Cline’s revisionist Confucianism would have helped clarify her views and how they related to the claims of early Confucians themselves, contemporary feminists, and scientific theory. One last concern I had, unrelated to my suggestion of decentralizing Confucianism in the book, was the prioritization of analyzing the Analects, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi, at the expense of the other texts which actually explicitly discuss early childhood.

To begin with my most basic concern, then: I worry I would be just as persuaded without any mention of early Confucians. I think the conclusion of societal change could be reached by
just using the science and feminism that Cline draws on. One element that fuels this concern is how Cline uses the contemporary western resources—science and feminism—to validate the Confucian claims to be taken seriously. In my initial reading, it seemed as if science took precedence over everything, and that all of our decisions should be based on that. A counter to this may be that science alone can’t make normative claims, and that Confucianism has the ability to make sense of empirical data by placing it in a framework of understanding. However, I’m not fully convinced of this, because the human ecology theory and attachment theory that Cline mentions as providing the foundation for the NFP point to some common sense normative conclusions. After all, the NFP, despite being the only scientific study Cline points to, has no foundation in Confucianism. Cline may respond that the NFP and the underlying theory have a limited scope, and that Confucian ideas of early childhood and parent-child relationships have a much more far reaching scope and have ties to a larger framework on how society as a whole ought to be. I would argue though that this is where care ethics and contemporary feminism can fill in. Most of the relevant claims Cline made about early Confucianism that weren’t validated by science I found to be validated by contemporary feminism. In fact, Cline’s exposition in Chapter 4 made me much more persuaded by the care ethicists. They account for the strongest and most relevant Confucian claims without the Confucian frame. The feminist inclination to oppose traditional values and filial piety, among other things, is more attractive to me, which isn’t surprising because I’m coming from the same western tradition. But in addition to that, in Cline’s suggestion for Confucianism and care ethics to inform each other, she makes much more revisions to Confucianism than she does to care ethics. The few revisions that she does make to care ethics are objections that could easily arise within a western care ethics frame, and often are based on science. The primary revision she wants to make is for care ethicists to care more about pregnancy and prenatal matters, a revision that is convincing (to me, at least), but only because of the scientific evidence that supports it. Also, all of the revisions she makes to Confucianism are based on western ideas—no effort is made to use later Confucian or other non-western frameworks.

Perhaps Confucianism provides a more robust framework that accounts for an even wider conception of society, with a rich supply of stories, anecdotes, and resources for us to draw on. This does not convince me. While I agree that our culture could benefit from the sort of change Cline argues for, and I also agree that the humanities provide a valuable resource in providing stories and other means of creating change, it appears to me that science and feminism in our current culture are sufficient. There is definitely further work to be done, and there’s no reason that Confucian ideas can’t provide inspiration and guidance. But they by no means need to be central, which is why I think an equally convincing book could be written centralizing science and feminism. I don’t at all want to say that western views are superior to the Confucianism Cline advocates for. Cline’s argument, though, is that we have a problem in the west, and our western tools are not capable of solving it, which I don’t think is true. Looking to the early Confucians can be very fruitful in addressing our problems, but I don’t think that putting them so central to the project is useful. An example of this is when she describes the scientific theories that underscore the NFP. While she goes into deep exposition on human ecology theory and attachment theory, she only quickly mentions self-efficacy theory, a theory that had an equal stake in informing the NFP, because it lacked “particular continuities with the Confucian views that are the focus of this book” (202). In other words, she missed a chance to expound on evidence backing up her practical goal of positive societal change, only because it didn’t have
any tie to Confucianism. Here is a clear case when the Confucian focus of the book holds her back.

That isn’t my only issue with Cline’s attempt to show that early Confucian views are distinct. I think that she limited her overview of western thought in Chapters 3 and 4 by only focusing on philosophy. Cline implicitly labels Confucianism as ‘philosophy’, and in order to prove distinctiveness, looks to traditional western notions of philosophy. The problem here is that Confucianism covers much wider territory than a traditional narrow western notion of philosophy. In other words, if we apply western categories to Confucianism, we can not only categorize it as ‘philosophy’ but also as ‘religion’ and even at times ‘poetry’ or ‘psychology’. Because of this, in proving distinctiveness, it’s not fair to only search ‘philosophy’. It would have been interesting for Cline to discuss western religion’s take on children and family, as it certainly has a strong impact on our culture’s widespread thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. For another example, at the start of Chapter 2, in a section somewhat foreshadowing Chapter 3’s search for distinctiveness, Cline quotes Van Norden who notes “a paucity of discussion of childhood education and conditioning in the Mengzi. Childhood experience is stressed as a crucial factor in character formation by both Plato and Aristotle, as well as by modern developmental psychologists of various persuasions” (42) (emphasis mine). Cline successfully follows up in the next chapter in addressing Plato and Aristotle’s discussion of childhood, but she doesn’t afford this same treatment to modern developmental psychology. This is not to say that I think one would find views identical or related to Confucian views down any of these western avenues. I think it would have strengthened her ability to call Confucian views distinctive. To only look at western views from narrowly defined philosophy doesn’t fully achieve her goal of proving distinctiveness through a comprehensive overview of western thought, and leaves us wanting more.

I have a number of smaller objections that further support my concern that centralizing Confucianism detracts from Cline’s practical goals. One of these has to do with Cline’s comparison of early childhood moral cultivation in early Confucian texts with NFP results. Most of the passages from Confucian sources that Cline cites to back up her claim that Confucians put a strong focus on early childhood moral cultivation involve the cultivation of a young king or some sort of future ruler. Cline says the practices regarding infants in the Book of Rites “are adhered to by the rulers of states and their families” (59). Her example from Protecting and Tutoring concerns how “The kings of ancient times” raised the “crown prince” (60). The Book of Odes talks about how King Wen’s mother, Tai Ren acted (64). In contrast, the NFP “works greatest for families at greater risk,” and Cline suggests that to include lower-risk families “would not only be wasteful from an economic standpoint; it would carry the risk of diluting NFP services to families who most need them due to insufficient resources to serve everyone effectively” (196). Cline never addresses the economic or social class of the subjects of the Confucian texts, but a plausible reading is that education of the ruling class was most crucial because they had the most influence. In a similar but inverted logic to the NFP, it may be nice to educate everyone in this way, but impractical, so focus should be on the influential. Perhaps there are other explanations for only talking about rulers, like that they were seen as role models for all of society to emulate, or because stories of famous people were more interesting to tell. If this were so, I’d like to see Cline address that.
In any case, the NFP exists in an entirely different mode. It appears that the program is most successful for higher-risk families because they don’t have access to the resources lower-risk families have, and that the lower-risk families, with their sufficient resources, are able to raise their children effectively. In other words, according to the NFP, western modes of raising children work just fine for most people. If Cline were right about the NFP exhibiting Confucian values, wouldn’t the NFP show an improvement for all classes? One way that Cline might address this is by saying that if the NFP was expanded and really drew on Confucian materials, it would have different treatments for cultivating children in different classes of families. I’d rebut by saying first that the Confucians never advocate for different rituals based on different classes, and second that since this sort of updated NFP doesn’t exist, there is no evidence to support that it would work. I think though, Cline opens up an area of future research. Despite her Confucian ideas not being completely proven by scientific data, she is not required to find a study that perfectly lines up with the thousand-year old claims she aims to back up. In fact, she succeeds in some sense by showing us that early Confucian ideas not only find some validation in modern science, but also have the ability to ask relevant questions and direct our current scientific research.

A topic that I think could have used a bit of clarity was Cline’s take on filial piety. She seems to take an ambiguous stance. In certain areas, she states that it is the root of all virtue and “provides the foundation for a person’s moral development” (39). She even notes that “the absolute importance of filial piety and its role as the foundation of ethical sense is perhaps the clearest indicator of how important the early Confucians considered childhood education to be…. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the roots of the other virtues; they provide the foundation for the entire course of a person’s moral development” (43). In these passages, Cline gives filial piety central and foundational importance, importance that no other Confucian concept matches. But in other sections, particularly in discussions of care ethics, she seems more willing to sideline its importance. She appears to sympathize with Noddings’s and Held’s dismissal of filial piety when she says,

Confucian views can also be amended and augmented in compelling ways by Noddings’s emphasis on parents’ gratitude for their children, which can help us recognize that Confucianism places far too much emphasis on the contributions of parents and the reasons why they deserve respect and reverence. Held’s view, too, highlights ways of augmenting Confucian views through her argument that parent-child relationships do not just nurture our moral development through a foundational virtue like filial piety…. (185)

She appears here to not just be summarizing Noddings and Held’s views, but agreeing with them as well. Another area where Cline takes a more negative stance towards filial piety is in her discussion of attachment theory: “Two aspects of early Confucian views on these matters stand in particular need of further refinement, based on what attachment theory tells us. The first is the specific nature of filial piety and the tendency of Confucians to focus more on respect and reverence than love and affection for and trust in one’s parents” (223). These critiques of filial piety—to which Cline seems to assent—are not slight alterations to the idea of filial piety; they suggest completely overthrowing its importance. Seeing as filial piety has such a foundational role, these dissents seem to pose a much larger challenge to Confucianism than Cline acknowledges. It is also difficult to parse what Cline herself wants to say from her discussion of
early Confucian views in disagreement and development, as well as feminist views and attachment theory’s claims. I don’t think Cline’s issue is making sweeping contradictions; I just think that she would have benefited from a more explicit discussion of filial piety that incorporated all of these different voices in one place.

An issue I had unrelated to my suggestion to decentralize the early Confucians from Cline’s project is regarding how much she engaged with Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi. I think, given that none of them have anything to say about early childhood or parent-child relationships, that Cline should spend less time with them than she does with the other Confucian texts. Having them take up so much space at the start of the book only lead to confusion. It gave me the impression that Cline was trying to argue that their passages said important things about early childhood, and I found these arguments very weak. Take for instance the introduction to the first passage she examines in Chapter 2: “Perhaps the most obvious passage from the Analects to make clear the importance of early moral cultivation is 1:2” (43). However, 1:2’s relationship to early moral cultivation is not obvious at all. She may have been correct to say that it was the most obvious passage, but that is only because there is no mention of early childhood in the Analects. The Mengzi and Xunzi are no different in this regard. I want to be clear that I absolutely think there is great value in referencing these texts, as they are some of the most important and foundational to the tradition. They are essential in creating the framework that situates the claims about early childhood found in other texts. But I found that many of the claims she pulled from those three texts did not help her argument, and actually distracted from other Confucian claims. To be technical, Cline spends 57 pages dealing only with the Analects, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi, whereas she only spends 34 pages unpacking passages from the other five texts. Although she does spend some time admitting that the Analects, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi don’t talk about early childhood, it is often in another person’s voice (to whom she doesn’t give full or explicit assent). She references Van Norden and Kupperman’s discussion of the lack of focus on early childhood at the start of Chapter 2, but still pushes against them. Indeed, Cline still wants us to read in between the lines in the Analects, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi to see that they are actually talking about early childhood, but this is a very difficult argument to make. I think she would have been much more effective if Chapter 2 started with examination of the five subsidiary Confucian texts, to give the reader a good grounding and faith that the Confucians were talking about early childhood, and then briefly moved back into the Analects, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi to show certain passages that possibly or plausibly talk or have things to say about early childhood. This plausibility though, heavily relies on the background of explicit discussion of early childhood, which is why it would be sensible to place it after that exposition.

I think that Cline has taken up a valuable project with her book. There is certainly value to examining Confucianism to use as a tool to amend current society. She does have some methodological issues, for instance validating Confucian claims with science and western thought. Leigh Jenco (another subject of this comparative philosophy collection, reviewed by Sitar Terrass-Shah) would perhaps criticize this method for not being open to dropping our comfortable, western categories and referents. Cline, however, might be able to respond by saying that it is part of her practical goal. This sort of reading and validating Confucian ideas might be necessary to convince our non-Confucian society to actually change. It may not be ideal to put one tradition’s philosophy in the terms of another, but perhaps it is needed for widespread traction. In any case, Cline faced many challenges like this. If Cline’s ultimate goal was to
convince us that Confucianism had at least some ability to inspire positive change, she succeeded. I think she put this complex relationship well while describing the mutual amendments she suggested for care ethics and Confucianism: “For the purposes of this work, it is not important whether or not we call this view “Confucian” or whether we describe it as a view that incorporates features of Confucianism; my aim is simply to demonstrate that Confucian values and ideas can help us address contemporary moral problems” (185).

Despite my myriad concerns, including those that question the necessity of the central role of Confucianism in the book, Cline successfully convinces us that Confucianism has value in our western moral life today in some capacity. I am certainly left believing that a greater focus on early childhood and parent-child relationships could be beneficial to western society. Further, it is indeed fascinating that early Confucians displayed an understanding of this importance so long ago, well before the west appeared to articulate similar claims. Cline’s book is situated in an interesting and difficult place within the field of comparative philosophy. She aims to have a deep, nuanced, and high-level engagement with a variety of early Confucian texts, and wants to put a contemporary, comparative, critical eye on her readings. But she also has the practical goal of appealing to a wide western audience, and inspiring change among that audience. This is a challenging set of goals to navigate, and she doesn’t always completely succeed. However, her endeavor to do so opens up a greater set of questions of accessibility and practicality within the practice of comparative philosophy.
Luminosity on the Move


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Berger’s *Encounters of Mind* tells the story of a key philosophical development in the journey of Buddhism from South Asia to China. Early Buddhist literature describes the mind as luminous, a characterization that was picked up by those who spread Buddhism into China. While originally this notion was to convey clarity of mind, by the time it reached China it was to become a fundamental state of enlightened consciousness that we strive to return to. In this review I first discuss the content of the book, summarizing the story chronologically. I then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Berger’s method, highlight his contribution to comparative philosophy and critique aspects of his argument. Next, I discuss a fascinating dimension of Berger’s relationship with the texts discussed in this work, before finally deliberating on the question of intended audience. Ultimately, I suggest, the book’s success hinges on its ability to show the reader that the journey of luminous mind is a true story, and this is where Berger’s efforts fall short.

The Story

The book is divided chronologically into chapters, each of which focuses on a period in the history of Chinese or South Asian philosophy. Designed both to explore key texts in their own right and present an arc of development in the bigger picture, each chapter discusses internal disagreements as well as underlying shared assumptions. We start with the classical Chinese period in which various accounts of personhood share an idea of bodily cognitions, with an emphasis on the mental role of 心 xin, the heart, in regulating behavior. Berger characterizes this period as Chinese naturalism, stressing his claim that these thinkers largely shared limited metaphysical accounts of personhood. This sets the ground for his later discussion of Chinese Buddhism and neo-Confucianism, in which he claims the fundamental notion of personhood has shifted.

He then takes us to South Asia to focus on two Brahmnic schools that were flourishing alongside the development of Buddhism. Berger argues that the Sāṁkhya and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools were in widespread agreement about the metaphysical basis of consciousness, the spirit that provides prakāśatva, cognitive luminosity to the person. They disagreed on the precise nature of the self, with the Nyāya school emphasizing the active role of the ātman in experience, in contrast to the spectator role of the Sāṁkhya puruṣa. But in this chapter Berger emphasizes that these schools shared the assumption that the body would be unconscious without the dimension of spirit that lights up the faculties of perception. Hence, this chapter provides the
background for a discussion of luminosity and consciousness that is central to the story being told as it emerges in Buddhist India.

The subsequent step in this journey concerns the Yogācāra school of Buddhism that was to have profound influence on the Chinese intellectual scene. This chapter is the pivotal point of the story as it discusses the emergence of the notion of the fundamentally luminous mind in India, and its transmission to China. It is unlike the other chapters in two ways: firstly, it does not present a dialectic between roughly contemporaneous schools, instead focusing on the particular development of Vijnānavādin thought, and secondly, it names precise individuals who transmit a philosophical idea into another lineage. This latter dimension, the translations and commentary of Paramartha, is the best smoking-gun evidence of Berger’s claim for a philosophical journey. Indeed, this leg is precisely what shapes the thesis of the book as a development from South to East Asia.

Following this, the remaining chapters focus on debates that Berger claims share the idea of fundamentally luminous personhood, with disagreements over its consequences for praxis. For Chan Buddhists, this manifests in a disagreement about what the nature of monastic life should be. On the one hand, as emphasized by the Chan/Huayen synthesizer Zongmi, intellectualizing has brought such a sophisticated understanding of the mind and world that we can come to explain our behavioral guidelines based on the principles of Buddhist cosmology. Berger presents luminosity as being something of a first principle, whereby aspects of the Chinese three teachings can coalesce in a path to enlightenment that is our foundation. For his intellectual rival Linji, Berger shows a very different consequence of luminosity. If we are fundamentally enlightened, then we cannot overthink such matters and must be shocked into our original state to dispel the artifice of our attached lives.

Lastly, Berger claims that neo-Confucians had picked up on this Buddhist cosmology and its relation to the principle of an innate perfection. In this light, the prescriptive program of the earlier Confucians can now be justified in a new way. That is, morality is grounded in the fact that the sages were acting out of their inner luminous coherence when proposing standards for behavior. For Zhu Xi this means stable virtues are built in to our coherence as people (171), and for Wang Yangming this was a matter of innate knowledge of such virtues (173). Such a psychology lends itself to a program of self-cultivation, given that we must encourage something to grow that is already to be found with us.

**Attention to primary sources**

Berger wants to tell a story, yet places great emphasis on primary sources in order that they tell their part themselves. In doing so, he is naturally faced with the dilemma of choosing translations from which to cite, and overcomes the potential difficulties of this by including the source language alongside the translation. So, the reader has the opportunity to consult the classical Chinese characters or the transliterated Sanskrit originals, an approach that avoids concealing any crucial manipulations of language. Further, he inserts the source language into key passages of the English translations to highlight potential ambiguities in the translation. Such interpolations are especially important where Chinese characters such as 气 qi and 理 li are rendered into various English terms. Given that his work relies so heavily on the transmission of
ideas through particular metaphorical terms, attention to linguistic detail is vital. His approach gains the trust of the naïve reader, who may not have the resources to discriminate a stretch from a twist. This is particularly salient in his decision to use various translations of the same texts, such as the Xunzi, as well as inserting his own adaptations to others’ works and entire passages of his own translation. In so doing he presents an impressive dimension of his researcher’s toolkit as he is able to navigate the nuances involved in rendering ancient texts for modern readers.

In keeping with his mission to allow the texts to speak for themselves, there is not a great deal of indulging in his own voice. In itself, this is refreshing for the reader, but also presents its own challenges. He offers concise interpretations of the passages he provides and avoids overegging the pudding of their analysis. This offers the naïve reader insight into a fascinating variety of texts, most of which are quite difficult to interpret at the first attempt. For example, Berger does well to present the Linji Yu Lu, stressing the pedagogical context of this otherwise challenging text, as well as highlighting the irony of the ritual reenactment of its dialogues (144). Yet such a heavy emphasis on the worlds of the primary sources themselves seems to have contributed to a fairly low-key investigative project of the steps taken on the journey that the book is dedicated to.

**Telling a story: success?**

Of course, the success of this book hinges on Berger showing that the story being told is indeed true. To reiterate, the story is this: the concept of the luminous mind was formed by early Buddhists and transformed by Vijñānavādins to subsequently flourish in Sinitic Buddhism and neo-Confucianism thereafter. The question is, has Berger done enough to show that the successive schools and eras covered in this book were in dialogue to the extent that the fundamentally luminous mind was a development of South Asian Buddhism that thrived on its journey into China? And in the same vane, that luminosity for neo-Confucians as part of 理 li was indeed a development of 心 xin as expounded by Chan Buddhists?

**Coming to China**

Berger highlights an obvious pinnacle for this story in the translations and commentaries of Paramartha. His emphasis on the ‘untainted cognition’ as the pure ground from which enlightenment emerges resolves an intellectual problem for Buddhist philosophy, and Berger aligns this with similar resolutions in the Madhyāntavibhāga (109). In both of these cases, thinkers develop an idea using the notion of luminosity, taken from earlier Buddhist texts and applied in this new setting. For Paramartha, this featured among his prolific and profoundly influential corpus that was to become a bedrock of Chinese Buddhism. In passing, Berger also refers to the influential *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, roughly contemporaneous with Paramartha and another proponent of the idea that enlightenment is a ‘pregiven’ state of mind, though without specific reference to the terminology of luminosity (117).

In so far as such a small sample of texts ever can, this gives the impression of the intellectual zeitgeist of early Chinese Buddhism where the notion that a basic state is returned to when we achieve enlightenment has much currency. Given the well-known influence of
Paramartha, it is reasonable to infer a causal relationship between the Vinjnanavadin account of luminous mind and its subsequent flourishing in China. Yet despite the chronological structure of the book, Berger does not attempt a detailed genealogy of luminosity and personhood per se. Following the discussion of the Paramartha and the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, Berger moves swiftly to internal debates in Chan Buddhism, highlighting the preeminence of basic luminosity as a solution to questions of personal enlightenment and cosmological origins. Given the centrality of this passage to the book, slightly more emphasis on tracing the Chan discussion to Paramartha-era debates could have enriched and supported this point.

*Pre-History of the Luminous Mind*

Pursuing the question of influence, Berger states that early canonical Pali literature had a concept of the “luminous mind” (*prabhāsvarām cittam*) and hints at the Yogācāra thinkers’ invocation of this (92). We are told that this notion was important for praxis, and by extension enlightenment (110), but this is only discussed briefly and in passing. We are not given details of its relationship to debates with any Brahminical or Vedic traditions. But, given the particular selection of Brahminical texts in discussion, it is likely that such a reference would predate these. As such, it becomes slightly unclear as to how these particular Brahminic schools influenced the relevant notion of the book. Indic Buddhism was certainly shaped by its intellectual elder rivals in ways relevant to personhood, as we see in with the continuation of karma into the Buddhist discussion of the body. One question for Berger’s “philosophical journey” is how far the luminosity or perfection in personhood that develops in this narrative was shaped by the thoughts discussed in the Brahminic chapter.

Berger does not stress causal links between the two, but discusses commonalities allowing the reader to infer that the former influences the latter. In other words, he discusses the kinds of things non-Buddhists were saying in the period leading up to the formation of Yogācāra, to help paint a picture of the intellectual climate. Yet he says he wishes to draw attention to ‘little-noticed influences of the Indian philosophical tradition on the Chinese that flowed through Buddhism’ (55). But, based on the evidence of this book, it would be hard to say that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya were instrumental in shaping the intellectual ground from which Buddhist thinkers were to develop the central theme of a basic enlightened personhood, as a discussion of the causal links is not provided. The earliest Buddhist mention of the luminous mind as an account of basic perfection in the story of this book comes in Asaṅga’s Madhyāntavibhāga. Indeed, the vast majority of the chapter on Yogācāra is devoted to a discussion of the Vijñānavādin philosophy of mind, presenting the problem of enlightenment that the originally luminous mind resolves for the Buddhists. This fits with Berger’s style of placing great emphasis on the primary texts, their context and interpretation. Yet there is no clear discussion of its relationship to Brahminic treatment of luminosity, except for one passage at the end of the Brahminic chapter: ‘like the Sāṃkhya philosophers, the Buddhists were profoundly committed to the conviction that human life held the potential to attain a final and lasting condition of peace that (...) lies ever waiting in a boundlessly illuminating principle of consciousness’ (88). This language of correlation rather than causation makes it difficult for the reader to confidently infer a shaping of Buddhism by Sāṃkhya thought on this measure. And so we are somewhat in the dark, as it were, on the pre-history of the luminous mind as basic personhood.
Neo-Confucianism

As Berger rightly emphasizes, the scale of Buddhist influence on Chinese philosophy was profound. This brings us to a closer look at the final leg of his journey, that of the legacy of the luminous mind as a pre-existing condition of human nature for the neo-Confucians. Berger discusses the transformation of 心 xin by the Buddhists, taking it from being an important component of the cognitive system, to being a primordial cause of consciousness (151). This latter dimension, of course, extended to include the very possibility for human beings to reach their prescribed goal. So the claim is that despite plentiful objections to the Buddhist social agenda, neo-Confucians engaged this immigrant account of human psychology. In a sense, this is two claims in one. Firstly, that classical Chinese discourse lacked an account of innate perfection, and secondly, that neo-Confucians were actively shaped by the Buddhist conception of this. If we accept Berger’s characterization of pre-Qin classical Chinese philosophy as being wholly naturalistic in the sense of denying a primordial perfection, then perhaps there is no reason to question the assertion of this leg of the journey. But even Berger questions this, saying ‘the idea of an ever clear and pure mind was hardly unknown to the foregoing sediments of Chinese speculation’ (113). This opens the doors to the complications involved in asserting the transmission of an idea, given the many nuances involved in these ancient texts.

Berger’s claim in support of the final leg is that neo-Confucian emphasis on people as ‘learners’ rather than ‘mimickers’ is a legacy of Buddhist influence (156). Buddhist-influenced language was taken up and used in this tradition. For example, the idea of 心 xin having basic perfection because of the causal principle of 理 li in everything, meaning that we are innately capable of illuminating the world, persists into the neo-Confucian framework. So, rather than following an external cosmic 道 dao, we can be guided from within. Of course Berger recognizes that Confucians had long emphasized learning and accentuating certain innately found thoughts and feelings in the process of self-cultivation. But, Berger argues, the stronger than ever emphasis on students learning for themselves, rather than over-indulging in the classics, shows an even greater belief in an internal principle of normativity. While the idea that this is directly a consequence of Buddhist philosophy is intriguing and eminently plausible, there are lingering doubts as to the question of proof.

In critiquing this account, I am not offering a counter-thesis that says these claims are in any way false. But I do intend to problematize certain elements of the logical structure of the argument as it is presented. There is an inevitable unfortunate consequence of a book that tells the story of the journey of an idea, but does not go to great detail in demonstrating the causal links involved in its transmission. On the one hand, all of the writers discussed were so influential that we can expect their legacies to be broadly along the lines of Berger’s claims. But on the other hand, setting up a chronological account such as this risks implying a teleological relationship between one era and the next, a risk that only grows where counter-examples to the narrative are not provided. Perhaps this is knit-picky, but the distinction between correlation and causation can only be satisfactorily confirmed by isolating a cause.
Two Further Aims

Demonstrate Optimism

Berger repeatedly asserts his reading of all the texts in question to be fundamentally optimistic about the world. This, he claims, stems from his central question of luminosity, whereby human beings have the capacity to become perfect (10). His choice in justifying this claim is an interesting one. He avoids a discussion of pessimism, I think in part to allow the primary texts to occupy the focus of attention rather than make the book a response to Schopenhauer. This makes sense: he gives primacy to the texts, offers a faithful analysis that shows they are optimistic and the job is done. To overemphasize counter-examples by focusing on aspects of these traditions that appear to be pessimistic would be to indulge too much in his own interpretive voice, and therefore to detract from the very story he wishes to tell. Yet this comes at a cost. By not questioning the tension between the optimism of luminosity and the pessimism of targeting an end to the cycle of rebirth, the reader is left with the task of deciding how far to go with Berger’s characterization of optimism. That said, each discussion of luminosity certainly shows that there was far more than met Schopenhauer’s eye.

Rekindle Dialogue

At various stages in the book, including the back-cover, Berger characterizes the journey of luminosity and personhood as a ‘dialogue,’ and asserts his desire that his work can push to reignite such dialogue. Such an aim is of course a noble one: given the historical decline of Buddhism in South Asia, a fresh exchange of ideas could have fascinating consequences. Yet there is a lingering doubt as to whether dialogue is an appropriate term to characterize the story that unfolds in this book. He also refers to it as a journey, a term that seems more appropriate for his account, given the largely one-way direction of travel of the terms and concepts in question. Yet this also presents an exciting challenge for further study in this area. Lines and arrows on maps are never to be trusted; the exchanges on Buddhism’s road to the Middle Kingdom no doubt involved a complex crossing of paths and the continued study of these would further enrich our understanding of the eras in Berger’s study.

Contribution to Comparative Philosophy

This work makes an important contribution to the field of comparative philosophy in three key ways that I wish to raise here. Firstly, in approaching distinct philosophies over time, Berger avoids the pure ideas paradigm of discussing arguments directly against each other. This way, he is able to situate the thinkers he discusses in a unique interplay of their intellectual milieu and a temporal moment with a past and a future. If discussing writers who built more explicitly off of each other, akin to the history of European philosophy, this may not be needed given widespread consensus over the trajectory of the cannon. But as we move towards a global history of philosophy in cross-cultural perspective, appropriate reminders of the challenges faced by philosophers as they pushed their ideas is of primary importance, especially where the pre-history of the concepts in use are unknown to authors.
Secondly, the open approach to translation discussed above could set an important precedent for the discipline. If this work is to enter a widespread debate about the path of luminous personhood across Asia, then certainly providing the source languages in the text enables direct scrutiny of claims. This is all the more relevant for the dimension of metaphor in this work, where terminology such as ‘luminosity’ and ‘mind’ come to take transformed meanings and connotations across different languages. This is particularly relevant for works that use the canonical languages of comparative philosophy such as Sanskrit and Classical Chinese.

Thirdly, in discussing the relationship between philosophical traditions that flourish long before substantial European contact, Berger conducts a study in comparative philosophy that does not discuss canonical Euro-American philosophers, barring a refutation of Schopenhauer that was too enjoyable to leave out. Other than his own, all of the voices discussed in this book stem from the history of South and East Asian philosophies. Further, he is careful to avoid simple reification of cultural boundaries, as indeed this book highlights the fluidity of these. He elegantly avoids dichotomizing Brahminic and Buddhist thought, which opens the readers eyes to the crossovers in their cosmologies. He also avoids labels such as ‘Hindu’ in his careful reconstruction of Indic cultural heritage, and so navigates the easy trap to fall into of fragmenting South Asian intellectual history. Though, presumably beyond his power, the label ‘EASTERN THOUGHT’ graces the back cover.

This brings us to another potential difficulty. While Berger demonstrates attentiveness to the flexibility of cultural boundaries in the project as a whole, he does risk creating one rather large dichotomy from the outset. As discussed in his response to Schopenhauer, Berger asserts that the various traditions surveyed in this book all share one fundamental feature: ‘the goal of praxis’ was ‘to become perfect’ (10). Yet, in the conclusion he recognizes dimensions of generalization in comparing various schools, which he claims may provoke further debate (193), and stresses that plenty of Asian traditions did not employ the notion of luminosity (202). Nevertheless, even hinting of a pan-Asian shared optimism about human nature runs the risk of straying into a well-trodden essentialist path that creates an East/West binary. This is not a path that I believe Berger takes but it is an available interpretation of his treatment of optimism. This is perhaps most clear when referring to the intellectual force of South and East Asia: ‘perhaps, however, it behooves us, in the face of the long-standing civilizational pedigree of these traditions, to reconsider their optimisms about human existence as a worthy philosophical challenge, even a provocation’ (198). But, for the most part, the language of inter-civilizational intellectual challenge takes a back seat to the primary sources themselves.

**Fascinating, but…**

There is one standout feature of this book that could provoke plenty of further discussion. In introducing the topic of luminous consciousness, he says that this concept is ‘as fascinating as it is incredibly difficult for [him] to reconcile with [his] present estimation of what consciousness is’ (6). Firstly, Berger claims that such an active account of consciousness has been out of favor in ‘the history of Western thought’ (ibid). Secondly, where active notions of consciousness have been offered, they have tended towards anti-realist conception of the role of consciousness vis-a-vis the natural world. He asserts that any effort to discuss the South and East Asian ideas of luminosity in such terms would be to ‘obfuscate rather than clarify its intended senses’ (7). For
Berger, luminosity in these traditions involves an active and realist conception of consciousness, revealing the world for us to act upon. This notion is precisely what his self-labeled ‘naturalistic inclinations’ seem to be at odds with. He claims (disputably) that recent cognitive science supports the view that conscious consists of biochemical processes, contingent upon the environment (8). Important to note, he is careful to avoid dichotomizing modern science with ancient Asia and references the South Asian materialist Cārvāka and Lokāyata thinkers. Yet he goes on to offer a metaphorical sense in which consciousness could be luminous, aiding our navigation of environmental challenges, before affirming that this would be rejected by the thinkers he discusses in the book. And this is the crucial point at which Berger stresses his desire to allow the thinkers to speak for themselves, given his lack of enthusiasm for their claims.

On the one hand, the upfront honesty of Berger with regards to his own take is quite refreshing. In asserting from the start that he does not share the views discussed in the book, he bears the hallmark of both philosopher and historian. As a philosopher, he is concerned with the truth-value of the claims enough to make a serious assessment of them. From a historical perspective, the content of these debates are important in their own right. As he says: ‘its story must be told’ (6). This is especially noteworthy given his other revelatory discussion in the introduction. He tells us that in starting the project, he had expected the journey of luminous consciousness to spread from the spiritual connotations of South Asia to the more naturalistic realms of China, where a theory of consciousness emerging from the interactions between physical beings and their environment might appear (5). Alas, this was not to be. Yet this is a fascinating insight into his project that started with an almost romantic search for accord in the distant past, only to be confronted with a challenging, complex reality. However, a more cynical reviewer than I might pick up on this and speculate that the project of asserting optimism was motivated by the search for a new, overriding thesis following the abandonment of truth.

Audience?

One last question I would like to address directly, so as to highlight some of the strengths of this work, is that of intended audience. Based on content, style and language, who is this work for? On the one hand, there is a great deal of emphasis on including source language concepts. At an obvious level, only those trained in classical Chinese and Sanskrit can make use of the block quotations in these languages. But at a further level, words like manas, ātman, puruṣa, alamavijñāna, li and xin often appear in Berger’s discussion and analysis, following their original use with a translation. Of course, these are all terms that do not translate so readily into English, so their inclusion in Sanskrit or Chinese has accuracy in mind. But it may provide a serious obstacle for the casually interested reader, suggesting an intended audience of students or specialists. For specialists in the intellectual history of South or East Asia, this work may not be so informative, given the pre-eminence of virtually all the writers cited. Yet, the range of primary sources and quality of their analysis makes this book a valuable resource for those interested in the philosophy of mind in cross-cultural and historical perspective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several of the stated aims can be judged to have limited success. Firstly, no reader can leave without having a good idea as to why the label “pessimistic” may be a woeful
oversimplification. Berger’s assertion of the opposite may not be easy to swallow, given the absence of a dialectical treatment of the issue in this story. Secondly, the idea of rekindling dialogue is certainly encouraging, and Berger’s own personal efforts to transcend the boundaries of modern academia by learning classical Chinese is a valuable example of this in practice. Time will tell whether future writers will endeavor to set Chinese and South Asian texts in dialogue. Thirdly, and crucially, the journey and influence of the Yogācāra luminous mind may well be true along the lines of Berger’s claims. But his decision to present a chronological succession of texts that speak for themselves, rather than presenting an argument for their relationship makes it impossible for the reader to confidently agree with the book’s thesis. On the evidence given, it is hard to see if anything beyond the metaphorical language of luminosity is really held in common across this time period. So Berger’s ‘Ship of Theseus’ style transformation is a possible interpretation, but coincidence may also feature. Yet, such a wide-ranging discussion of intriguing sources, alongside a well presented overarching interpretive theme, offers a great deal of insight to readers who wish to enrich their understanding of Asian philosophies of mind. This is enriched by the careful reconstruction of important debates that these thinkers found themselves in, an approach that gives appropriate emphasis to both context and historical narrative.
Metaphysical Modularity: Playing with the Pieces


Erik Hall, Wesleyan University ’16

*Why Be Moral?* by Yong Huang is a brilliantly written examination and explanation of both Chinese and Western philosophy through the representative positions of each on contentious topics in traditional Western ethics. In an effort to evaluate Yong Huang’s success as an author, I am forced to look beyond traditional measures of a book’s worth, for if I limited my scope as such the entirety of this review would be an attempt to explain how enjoyably well-written it is before I tell you to just go and read it. So instead, in a sincere attempt to present something that can be considered productive and worthwhile, I have turned my attention to an evaluation of Huang’s book based on the degree of success he attains according to guidelines he himself sets forth. In order to achieve this I begin with an examination of Huang’s methodology and mission, followed by my introduction of three crucial concepts with which I evaluate three selections from Huang’s work, before finally concluding with my thoughts as to his overall successes and shortcomings. In short, while *Why Be Moral?* is a great and highly informative read, as a goal-oriented project its success is uncertain due to an incomplete treatment of the three concepts I introduce: Metaphysical Modularity, Metaphysical Entanglement, and Personal Philosophy.

**Methodology and Mission**

*Why Be Moral?* is written with the express purpose of showing Western philosophers that they should pay attention to Chinese philosophy. In fact, Yong Huang leaves nothing to interpretation as he defines both his mission and his audience early on in his introduction. In a single line he states “this book on the Cheng brothers is written in English and is addressed to Western philosophers,” which is closely followed by a second wherein he explains his goal to be founded on the belief that “Western philosophers have something important to learn from Chinese philosophy” (10). Essentially, Huang’s project is to make Chinese philosophy, specifically that of the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers, relevant to those who either see it as irrelevant or fail to see it at all.

The Cheng brothers, the source of answers for Huang, are a pair of Song Dynasty Chinese philosophers who are widely regarded as the founders of Neo-Confucianism. Yong Huang paints a clear picture for the reader of the story of the Cheng brothers’ intellectual past, their upbringing, their many accomplishments, and their legacies. The great degree of care with which Yong Huang endeavors to preserve their history and their ideas, going so far as to restrain himself from even adding his own interpretations in favor of accurately representing the Chengs’
ideas, presents the potential for his work to be taken purely for its merits as an authoritative factual resource on the Cheng brothers, but I digress.

According to Huang, if you want to develop someone’s interest in a topic, a good place to start is by showing them that it is pertinent to their interests. To this end, he places his focus on what he believes to be the “interesting and important things [the Cheng brothers] have to say on the philosophical issues with which [Western philosophers] are concerned” (12). What he is trying to do is “see how Chinese philosophers, the Cheng brothers in this case, can help Western philosophers answer their (Western philosophers’) own questions” for in order to “introduce to Western philosophers a Chinese philosopher they are not familiar with, it is pointless to show them how ridiculous (some of) this Chinese philosopher’s ideas are or how inferior these ideas are to those found in their (Western philosophers’) own tradition” (12).

In this way Yong Huang lays the framework for his approach to doing comparative philosophy in a Western context. He devotes a good chunk of his introduction to establishing the viability of comparative philosophy, citing a variety of comparative thinkers to set the stage. Since the possibility of comparative philosophy, as one of the introduction’s sections is titled, ought to be a foregone conclusion at this point, I will merely point to his concluding remarks regarding how he believes one should do comparative philosophy where he states, “what type of comparative philosophy one does is at least partially determined by the goal one attempts to reach by doing it, and the goal one attempts to reach is at least partially affected by the audience one has in mind” (9). As a result of such an approach, Huang embraces the bounds and context of Western philosophy as the more productive platform from which to reach his goal of illustrating, for the Western philosopher, the importance of Chinese philosophy.

Having read such authors as Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, the clarity and ease with which one can attend to Yong Huang’s work is a much appreciated breath of fresh air in a field where too often authors seem intent on hiding meaning behind obtuse grammar and page-long sentences. Huang’s style can best be described as a complete and systematic treatment of ideas in a manner that proceeds cleanly and clearly from point to point. It definitely is not the case that Huang is simply dealing with easily comprehended theories and thinkers but rather that the way in which he treats them lays their meaning out in terms even the uninitiated can easily understand. In his writing this often takes the form of a smoothly introduced block quote which is followed immediately by a complete and thorough analysis and then explanation of how the identified ideas pertain to the greater narrative. Seeing the works of Kant, Heidegger, Zhu Xi, Mencius, and others with which I have some personal familiarity, being utilized by Huang and then clarified in ways that deepened my understanding of their ideas has left me with nothing but praise for his powers of elucidation.

The body of the book is comprised of seven chapters sandwiched between an introduction and an appendix. The general organization of his chapters and their topics is such that each builds upon what has just been dealt with in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the more complex whole. For instance, while chapter one provides the Chengs’ answer to the question of why one should be moral, it leaves open the question of whether such an answer falls prey to another criticism, skillfully positioning the reader for the answer provided
In the subsequent chapter, Huang leads a guided tour through seven problems in Western ethics to which he claims the Cheng brothers have better solutions:

2. Virtue (de 德): Is a Virtuous Person Self-Centered?
3. Knowledge (zhī 知): How is Weakness of the Will (akrasia) Not Possible?
4. Love (ài 愛): Ethics between Theory and Antitheory
5. Propriety (lǐ 礼): Why the Political Is Also Personal
6. Creativity (lǐ 理): The Metaphysics of Morals or Moral Metaphysics?
7. Classics (Jīng 經): Hermeneutics as a Practical Learning

In his first chapter he explains that for the Chengs, one’s motivation for being moral should be the joy one will experience when acting morally. Moving to his second chapter, Huang explains that according to the Chengs, the moral person is not self-centered because virtuous action is inextricably linked with care for the other. In his third chapter he dismisses the possibility of weakness of the will since for the Cheng brothers, when one has true moral knowledge, one is unable not to act morally and such moral knowledge is available to all. In Chapter Four Huang asserts the Cheng brothers’ approach to how one should be moral is founded in a love for others that is at once equal yet particular to the individual. Chapter Five turns to the Cheng brothers’ conception of social ethics, stating that the rules of propriety that should govern human interaction at the personal level are what laws at the societal level should aim at promoting as well. In his penultimate chapter Huang brings to the fore the Chengs’ conception of an empirically based moral metaphysics wherein moral experience is the grounding basis of a metaphysics that aims at explaining morality. In his final main chapter Huang explores the benefits of the Chengs’ hermeneutics which manage to solve the debate over what an interpretation should account for since the Dao of the Classics is the same Dao that is found in humans and therefore to study the Classics is to study one’s self.

Of note is perhaps the lack of mention of the Western philosophical content, of which there is indeed a substantial amount, but with which I have no issues. Instead I would like to focus on the nature of Yong Huang’s enterprise and the very nature of its successes or failures. My discontent with Why Be Moral? stems from my background in Neo-Confucianism and my preexisting bias toward agreeing with the philosophy of the Cheng brothers. My point being that even from such a perspective, I was not convinced that the Cheng brothers’ solutions would, or even could, really appeal to the stated audience of Western philosophers. In order to explain what I believe is going on here I need to introduce and define the three concepts around which I will center the remainder of my evaluation of Huang’s work:

1. Metaphysical Modularity
2. Metaphysical Disentanglement
3. Personal Philosophy

At its core, what Huang is attempting to do is bring the ideas from one philosophical tradition into the context of another. Though he claims that all he is trying to do is generate interest among Western philosophers in Chinese philosophy, in order for his mission to be possible, he implicitly needs to be able to modularly work with the ideas and metaphysics of the Cheng
brothers and their Western counterparts. By this I mean that if it is the case that an idea or concept that is the result of the Cheng brothers’ metaphysics implies the entirety of their metaphysics, it becomes impossible to take only a part of their teachings without bringing the rest of them with it. This would mean that in order for one to believe that “it is a joy to be moral” one would also have to accept the rest of the Chongs’ teachings, some of which Yong Huang already acknowledges as inferior to those of the West.

In order for metaphysical modularity to be possible, first the possibility of metaphysical disentanglement must be established. This is the possibility for an idea to be easily extricated and separated from its larger metaphysical family and its various ideas or conclusions. Of course, the opposite is also a possibility and something that I believe Huang did not adequately consider. I call this metaphysical entanglement, or simply the inability for an idea to be easily taken without bringing along with it a large mass of metaphysics and all its associated and potentially undesirable ideas or conclusions.

At this juncture it is convenient to bring in the idea of personal philosophy as a way to understand what one is really doing when they come to believe in an idea or metaphysical explanation. As the term might suggest, what I am talking about is the philosophy that belongs to an individual that orders and contains their understanding of philosophy. One does not simply believe in every word Kant ever wrote but rather tends to have their own personal understanding of Kant’s work which forms only a part of their overall personal philosophical outlook. For instance, one may have read Kant, and may strongly believe in the value of pure reason and the categorical imperative, but also have read Hume and have a skeptical outlook on anything that one doesn’t know directly from one’s senses. In this case the individual might seem to believe in contradictory ideas or has simply never reflected to a degree great enough to realize such a discrepancy. Take, for instance, an individual who was brought up in a Christian household and taught the biblical conception of how one should always love one’s neighbor. This individual can conceivably believe in such an idea as loving one’s neighbor without taking it to the same degree as it might originally have been intended. Perhaps to this individual it only applies to those who do him no wrong. What has happened here is the integration of an external idea into one’s personal internal system.

At another level, one’s personal philosophy is often heavily influenced by one’s culture, background, and more broadly even their entire world view. If one’s culture places a great deal of importance on the definition of humanity as dictated by biology, it becomes a lot harder to get such an individual to even take seriously claims that one’s humanity is dependent on one’s capacity for morality. The key here is that even if an idea can be disentangled from its host, if the individual who is to receive it holds metaphysical beliefs that contradict the proposed idea’s metaphysics, the discerning individual, who we should take to be a Western philosopher for the sake of the forthcoming analysis, must either overturn their current beliefs in favor of the new, ignore it, or otherwise integrate it into their system independent of its original contradictory metaphysics. Regardless, the point I wish to make is that the larger the conflict between one’s current and incoming metaphysics, the greater the difficulty for its acceptance, and the lesser the chance that one will be interested in it.
In the end this is a matter of how Yong Huang can get Western philosophers to believe that Chinese philosophy can teach them something. I would like to propose that at least one way that he can achieve this influence is by ensuring that the ideas he selects from the Cheng brothers are not only easily disentangled from their metaphysics but also considerate of the personal philosophies of Western philosophers. In an attempt to ground these theories in practice, I will now turn to three examples from Why Be Moral? in order to illustrate the degree to which Yong Huang has either succeeded or could stand to benefit from a further consideration of metaphysical modularity, disentanglement, and the personal philosophies of his audience.

**Joy (le 樂): “Why Be Moral?”**

In the first chapter of his book, after establishing the Western philosophical context surrounding why one should be moral through the use of Plato, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, and others before promptly explaining their respective inadequacies, Yong Huang sets forth the Chengs’ beliefs that one should be moral because it is a joy to be, that those who are unable to find joy in moral activities simply lack the necessary moral knowledge, and that one should be moral because to be moral is characteristic of being human. Here we can begin our assessment of Huang’s choice of ideas based on the possibility of their modularity. With the core idea being the belief that one should be motivated to be moral because it is a joy to be moral, we are left to examine what metaphysical background, if any, is necessary in order for one to hold such a belief. Leaving aside the possibility that one could, from one’s own experience or reasoning, develop their own understanding of why being moral is a joy, my interest is in the metaphysical support postulated by the Chengs and employed by Huang. Of course, if one can easily conceive of their own support for such a notion, that would only speak to its modularity and the ease with which one can integrate it into their own personal philosophy. However, regarding Huang’s argument, he first cites the Chengs’ belief in the presence and function of knowledge in the pursuit of morality. According to Huang’s clarification of the Chengs’ teachings, “one will find it a joy to be moral if one has the necessary moral knowledge” and “everyone can have such moral knowledge as long as one is willing to make an effort” (53). Here we have some distinct claims as to the accompanying metaphysical underpinnings for how a belief in joy from morality can be justified.

Additionally, as I pointed out earlier, Huang also sees fit to add further explanation for the function of joy as the motivation for morality. In order to answer the objection that one could just as well seek joy in nonmoral things, Huang turns to the Chengs’ belief that “to be moral is characteristic of being human” (55). Up to this point it is difficult to take issue with any of Huang’s decisions as to his material and subject matter but he now presents a clear opening when he goes on to bring in Cheng Yi’s view that one who abandons morality, or is incapable of morality, cannot be considered a human being (56). Though this explanation for why one should seek joy in moral things helps to flesh out the Neo-Confucian foundation and context, its inclusion is emblematic of my concern for the possibility of Huang’s success when the personal philosophies of his audience are concerned.

As my classmates were eager to let me know, the very idea of disqualifying someone from the status as a human being seems to be an incredibly unpopular and inciting topic. Based on my observations of the general trend of the “global north,” which to my understanding is
composed of most, if not all, of the countries home to the Western philosophers Yong Huang targets, toward more inclusive definitions of humanity, I can say that at least a portion of his audience may have personal philosophical stances which set them diametrically opposed to such a conception. Especially since the inclusion of this extra piece of metaphysical context does not appear to be critical, or even that useful, in supporting his main claim, it perhaps would have been best to forgo it completely and avoid what appears currently to be a volatile topic.

Since it might not be possible to develop a complete system regarding motivation for morality from the Chens’ foundations without invoking Cheng Yi’s understanding of humanity, it may have been better to opt for an incomplete yet wholly acceptable system involving only the role of knowledge and joy as the motivation for morality. However, as completeness and ability to answer all objections appear to be the primary criteria by which Huang evaluates the Chens’ positions as superior to those of their Western counterparts, we are left with a choice between presenting a complete and solid system or an incomplete yet more palatable one. Since Yong Huang never concretely defines his standards for presenting the Chens’ solutions as better, I am in favor of a more distinctly modular idea which is more completely disentangled from items which may hinder acceptance into the personal philosophies of his audience. Though he opted for presentation of the whole truth of what the Chens have to say on the matter, were he to have considered with more urgency the generation of interest among his readers, it at least would be less dangerous, if not even beneficial, to simply present a system that, though imperfect, could still be appreciated as a new take on an old problem or even simply be more easily accepted and refined to fit within one’s own personal philosophy.

Knowledge (zhi 知): How is Weakness of the Will (akrasia) Not Possible?

Moving on to a second selection, Yong Huang’s choice of the problem of weakness of the will and the topic of moral responsibility appears to avoid many of my earlier worries while falling into an entirely different hole. While redefining humanity can draw unwanted attention, it would seem to me that the ongoing debate surrounding moral responsibility and problems of the will, including their direct relevance to daily life, make them good targets for grabbing and holding an audience’s attention, even if he fails to completely deal with the possibility of moral responsibility.

The Chens’ main idea is that weakness of the will is not possible and is founded on a number of their beliefs, beginning with when one has true moral knowledge, one will be unable to not act virtuously. “Knowledge will necessarily lead to action,” and “all those who have the proper knowledge will necessarily act appropriately,” are how Huang sums up the value of knowledge for the Chens as “prior to and implying action” (108, 106). He cites examples from the Chens in order to further define these beliefs into small and easily separated modular ideas, including a thorough examination of criticisms of such a knowledge-based system.

What he is doing is slowly building out a more complete system, adding one module at a time in order to strengthen the Chens’ position. We are introduced to the concept of innate moral knowledge, the seemingly circular relationship between knowing and acting, the difference between knowledge of as virtue and knowledge from hearing and seeing, and finally the role of one’s heart in discerning and gaining genuine knowledge. In each case Huang seems
to take great care to answer any and all potential objections raised by the Western tradition, progressing to each additional concept only in response to established concerns.

Where he runs into trouble is by failing to establish exactly how it is possible for one to be truly morally responsible in the sense that one is an agent in possession of free will. The entirety of what Huang presents is based on the assumption that free will is a given and fails to defend the Chenzs’ views against a truly determinist point of view. In an attempt to be charitable, it is possible to see the Chenzs’ view that knowledge leads to action, combined with an individuals’ ability to pursue knowledge, does allow for moral responsibility in a shallow sense, but it is still never made clear how one can even make the effort to pursue such knowledge through learning in the first place.

With the omission of the treatment of such a fundamental concern of moral responsibility, what we are left with is a system that works only when one is willing to make the leap of faith to a belief in the Chenzs’ system. In this way, though some of the presented ideas are in fact modular, such as the belief that knowledge leads to action, the whole of the argument amounts to a construct whose worth is available only to participants in the Cheng brothers’ metaphysics.

You end up with, rather than a solution to the traditional problem, a substitution to a new framework in which the problem simply does not exist. At the core of Huang’s argument is the impossibility of weakness of the will when one works within the metaphysics of the Cheng brothers. At some level this can be taken to be an argument for the superiority of the metaphysical system of the Chenzs rather than just of their resultant thoughts regarding the issue. When one realizes the nature of this situation to mean that the Chenzs’ solution in fact so greatly relies on their metaphysics, the degree of entanglement potentially becomes a hindrance to Huang’s goal. Though I do still believe each idea and its supporting metaphysical beliefs are capable of being taken modularly, when in the presence of so many as Huang brings them out, it becomes difficult to see them as anything other than a single network of supporting ideas wherein they each imply and support one another, depending on each other to function.

In lieu of potential entanglement in the Chenzs’ metaphysics, Huang perhaps relies on the appeal of the ideas themselves to convince the reader of the worth of the Chenzs’ version of the possibility of moral responsibility. It could be that he hopes, in the same way he says the Chenzs get to their metaphysics, as proceeding from experience to metaphysical explanation, if the ideas resonate with his audience they might come to realize the worth of the established original metaphysics, even if they are not directly convinced of them as truth. As a byproduct of at least demonstrating the worth of the Chenzs’ ideas and attempting to modularize them he does leave them open for an individual to take piecemeal when the whole does not hold together.

Realizing that it is part of Huang Yong’s stated goals to refrain from reinterpreting the Cheng brothers and instead merely to present their thoughts on the topics in question, I can only say that he has done exactly what he set out to do. However, there seems to be some tension between that goal and his central mission of generating interest in Chinese philosophy when presenting the entirety of the Chenzs’ metaphysics and their embodied solutions are concerned.
Though perhaps I am biased toward philosophy which can have direct and practical implications for one’s life, I feel that if Huang Yong had grounded the Chengs’ theories more clearly in a practical evaluation of their worth, he may have been able to make them more interesting. By this I suppose I mean further consideration of the role of current social justice issues in the development of an individual’s personal philosophy might have benefited his cause. Even just explaining plainly that under the Chengs’ system one is always capable of attaining moral knowledge and acting morally and therefore one who acts immorally is not a lost cause but simply in need of learning. Though I cannot speak for the broader audience, I at least find an optimistic message that upholds hope for the possibility of everyone’s morality to be more immediately practical, and thereby relevant, to my personal philosophy regarding relationships with others, if not just admirably optimistic, at least more interesting.

Classics (Jing 經): Hermeneutics as a Practical Learning

Having examined two of Yong Huang’s uses of the Cheng brothers’ solutions and seen mixed results based on my bases for evaluation, I hope to finish with a definitive demonstration of the value of my criteria by looking to his final chapter on the Chengs’ hermeneutics. The issue in Western philosophy that we are dealing with is supposedly the “question of whether a correct interpretation should aim at the objective meaning of the classics independent of both their authors and readers, at the original intention of authors beyond both the classics and readers, or at the preunderstanding of readers independent of both authors and texts” (224). Huang explains then that for the Chengs the classics carry the Dao and that the Dao of human beings is the same Dao. In this way, “the objective meaning of classics, the original intention of sages, and the preunderstanding of readers for Cheng Yi are all united, because classics are carriers of dao, sages wrote classics only to illuminate dao, and we read classics always with a mind that is nothing but dao” (231).

This all seems well and good until you attempt to pick it up and realize that rather than simply being entangled in the Chengs’ metaphysics, such a solution is inextricably linked to the Neo-Confucian tradition. The problem here is that this version of hermeneutics is founded on the belief in Dao and its underlying role in all of the Chengs’ beliefs. Additionally, it is restricted to the classics written by sages. What I see here is the complete departure from applicability and relevance that I believe to be essential to Huang’s goal of showing Western philosophers that they have something important to learn from Chinese philosophy. Though I cannot say no one would find this interesting, what I do feel is that people are generally less interested in things that have no bearing on them whatsoever. What people will find interesting are ideas and concepts which are useful to them; ideas that are easily picked up, if one is so inclined, and integrated into one’s own personal philosophy.

One possible, yet I believe unintended, explanation for the pertinence of the Chengs’ hermeneutics could be that the Western “classics” and their authors are also carriers of Dao and thereby sages. However, this is definitely not a direction that Huang or the Cheng brothers seem to entertain, not in the least because the prospect that Kant, or any number of other Western philosophers could be sages seems like the start of a bad joke. However, within such a notion is contained the possibility of the unification of all Western thought under the heading of the Dao, meaning that not only would the Chengs’ hermeneutic theory become relevant to the Western...
reader, but also that an individual’s personal philosophy which is grounded in, say, Kantian ethics, might not be so resistant to the integration of Chinese philosophy after all.

In the end this chapter on hermeneutics fails to teach the Western audience anything beyond mere facts of the Chengs’ system. Unlike previous chapters where the lesson to be learned was at least available and allowed for the possibility of being more than just knowledge, short of coming to believe in the Chengs’ entire metaphysical understanding for oneself, knowledge of their hermeneutics is near useless and therefore does little to add to the appeal of Chinese philosophy.

Conclusion

Were Huang to focus more greatly on disentangling the important ideas of the Cheng brothers into manageable and easily adopted chunks, and further work to illustrate the benefits of adopting their ideas over their Western competitors’, I believe Huang’s project would altogether be more convincing and thereby successful. Though utility is not everything, I believe I am not too far from the mark in saying that people tend to take an interest in those things that, more so than just being relevant, can have beneficial implications for their lives. Unfortunately, Huang’s understanding of what is likely to interest his audience seems to stop at “they will hardly be interested in learning how inferior or even absurd some philosophical view developed in the Chinese tradition are” and will be “interested in being shown that they can learn things from Chinese philosophy” (25).

However, when even the Cheng brothers’ philosophical views are imperfect, as Huang admits early on, it becomes hard to see the value of his project overall. Not in the least because he never explicitly lays out a method for evaluating the worth of one philosophy over another, what Huang is essentially doing is attempting to establish the worth of individual aspects of the Chengs’ philosophy over those of their Western counterparts in an attempt to influence the personal philosophies of his audience. In such a pursuit, though, he ought to have paid closer attention to those personal philosophies into which he hoped the Chengs’ teachings were to be adopted, meaning his battle with the progenitors of the Western philosophical tradition might be, if not misplaced, at least insufficient.

Despite all that has been said, Yong Huang’s Why Be Moral? has easily been the most interesting book I have had the pleasure of reading as an undergraduate. He does a wonderful job of making even the most obtuse concepts plain to read through a combination of deft explanation and eloquently simple language. In an examination of his work as a book among books, Why Be Moral? is an exceptionally well written repository of philosophical knowledge from both the East and West. My only concern is that, as a book written to be more than that, it falls short. While Yong Huang imbues his project with the hope that it might help shift Chinese philosophy into the broader philosophical scene currently dominated almost exclusively by Western thought, he has failed to fully realize the potential pitfalls his project faces. Though by no means can his project be called a failure, were Huang to have carefully considered the implications of a modular metaphysics and the importance of the personal philosophies of at least his intended audience, perhaps he could have more clearly achieved his goal, if not just increased his chances of success.
Warming Which Olds to Know Whose New? (溫故而知新？回應李明輝之 《儒家與康德》）


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At first glance, readers might be critical of the tasteless malapropisms that comprise this review’s title. On one hand, I have liberally borrowed from Alasdair MacIntyre’s book, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? which among several of his other works calcified the current notion of traditions popular in contemporary philosophical practice. On the other, I have “warmed” Confucius’s aphorism, “They who warm the old to know the new are worthy of becoming teachers.” Both these phrases, however, do capture certain intuitions of mine regarding Lee Ming-Huei’s (李明輝) 1990 book, Confucianism and Kant 《儒家與康德》. I find Lee’s thoughts certainly relevant to contemporary discourse on Confucian scholarship and moreover thought provoking, prompting my title question, “Warming which olds for knowing whose new?”

Lee clearly sees himself as working within what many in Chinese academic circles see as the mainstream lineage of Confucianism. This lineage begins of course with Confucius himself (孔夫子 551- 479 B.C.E.), following with the divergence between Xunzi (荀子 310-235 B.C.E) and Mengzi (孟子 372-289 B.C.E). According to the 20th century New Confucians, the former erected a tradition followed by later Song dynasty philosophers such as Zhang Zai (張載 1020 – 1077 C.E.) and Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130- 1200 C.E.), all of whom endorsed a “heteronomous” brand of Confucianism. Conversely, those following the latter, including Song dynasty’s Cheng Hao (程颢 1033-1107 C.E) and Lu Xiangshan (陸像山 1139-1192 C.E.), Ming dynasty’s Wang Yangming (王陽明 1472-1529 C.E), and New Confucians Xiong Shili (熊十力 1885-1968 C.E) and—deemed by many as the most influential Confucian philosopher of the 20th century—Lee’s own teacher Mou Zongsan (牟宗三 1909- 1995 C.E.). This branch, which claimed alignment with the Genealogy of the Dao (daotong 道統) endorsed the language of autonomy as the most adequate tool for deciphering Confucianism. As a result, contemporary practice in the Sinosphere has taken Confucianism’s status as an autonomous ethic as the mainstream norm. Lee in this sense is the inheritor of not only a philosophically important school but also a historically important one.

I would like to thank Professor Stephen Angle for commentary on preliminary drafts of this paper and Chen Fanying (陳帆影) for comments on translation.

All translations are by me unless noted otherwise.

I admit that this is not a complete Confucian genealogy. Lee’s own historical overview of Confucianism is much more comprehensive. See Lee 2013.
In a sense, this demonstrates the importance of his book. *Confucianism and Kant* is a collection of five essays by Lee: “Confucianism and Ethics of Autonomy,” “Mengzi and Kant’s Ethics of Autonomy,” “A Rejoinder: Mengzi’s Ethics of Autonomy,” “Mengzi’s Four Sprouts Heart and Kant’s Moral Sentiments,” and “From Kant’s Concept of ‘Happiness’ Discussing The Confucian Distinction Between Righteousness and Profit.” Overall, I credit Lee with providing synopses of Kant’s philosophy distinguished by brevity and succinctness (because let’s be honest, when talking about Kant this is kind of hard to do). Through such endeavors, we see Lee’s deep commitment to both philosophical traditions. I find this book a great companion to Kant’s original texts, as well as capturing some important intuitions of the original Confucian philosophers. I believe that Confucian scholars worldwide, regardless of their reading of Confucianism, should take seriously Lee’s insights and how they bring us to understand notions crowded out by the predominant engagement of Anglophone writers with virtue ethics. I divide my review into three parts: 1) a synopsis of each essay; 2) a critical engagement with certain claims in these essays; and 3) a final reflection on the future of Confucianism in light of the implications of Lee’s arguments.

**Synopsis**

While apparently disparate, all five essays are linked by Confucian philosophy’s resonance with Kantianism. Among the Confucian philosophers that Lee surveys, Mengzi receives significant attention, often serving as the focus of discussion.

I maintain that Lee subscribes to a theory of best fit. An account of this theory can be found in Edward Slingerland’s article, “Virtue Ethics, the ‘Analects,’ and the Problem of Commensurability.” Such an interpretive theory holds that the category, in question, in Lee’s case deontology, best captures shared aspects between two traditions. To put it crudely, we identify analogous structures in tradition A and B, and then utilize the names and terminology of one in order to make intelligible the other. This of course doesn’t address the effects of colonialism, such as discussed by Sitar Terrass-Shah’s contribution to this volume, but it does give us a common vocabulary to work from. While Lee himself provides no discussions at all on his methodology, it is clear that he believes Kantianism captures some vital intuitions about how we should interpret Confucianism.

The book begins with “Confucianism and Ethics of Autonomy,” which grounds preliminary arguments drawn on in later chapters. In this essay, Lee takes on criticisms of deontological Confucianism made by Academia Sinica’s Huang Chin-shing (黃進興). Lee summarizes Huang as inveighing attacks on three fronts: 1) The use of Kant as *comparata* for Confucian thinkers submits the latter into “oblivion and unclarity (*yaner buzhang* 淹而不彰) (12);” 2) The four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) are best understood as moral sentiments and not

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50 All translations are by me unless noted otherwise.
laws;\(^{51}\) and 3) The inappropriateness of using moral autonomy to decipher the essence of Confucianism.

Lee preempts his arguments by tracing the legal etymology of “autonomy,” and its relation to other Kantian concepts. Early on we see a clear understanding of autonomy’s relationship with the idea of maxims, the categorical imperative, the will, and other concepts. Having delineated the main components of the Kantian philosophical anthropology, Lee proceeds to elaborate on Confucianism’s status as a deontology.

Following, Lee carefully constructs his arguments, introducing preliminary grounds for autonomy in *The Analects*, and then utilizing the more robustly metaphysical statements of Mengzi, later Song-Ming dynasty philosophers, and Mou Zongsan to elaborate. While Confucius introduces deontological themes, the latter three provide a more comprehensive anatomy of the heart-mind and four sprouts as providing the seat of autonomy. Essentially, the four sprouts act as laws which move (dong 動) the heartmind (xin 心) to act (36-7, 40-1, 43-5).\(^{52}\)

Next, “Mengzi and Kant’s Ethics of Autonomy,” focuses more centrally on Mengzi’s relationship with Kantian autonomy. The concepts of the absolute nature of morality, good will, formalism, universality, human dignity, autonomy itself, and the freedom of the will provide the basis for comparison between the two, while they differ in philosophical anthropology. Lee confidently concludes that the seven above items proves a tight relationship between their philosophies, specifically corresponding with Mengzi’s “disdaining heart-mind (burenzhixin 不忍之心),” “preserving heart-mind (cunxin 存心),” the four sprouts, nobility (jue 爵), notions of choice, and seeking and neglecting (qiushe 求舍) (51, 53, 57, 62, 66-68, 71 respectively). The main difference on Lee’s part revolves around, “Kant’s ethics presupposing a sentiment-reason-two-tiered structure, and expelling all sentiments from the structure of morality (79).”\(^{53}\) On Mengzi’s part, all sentiments are contained within the original heartmind.

Compared to its prequel, *Mengzi’s Ethics of Autonomy* engages more critically with ambiguities in the Confucian texts. In particular, Lee and his interlocutor, Taiwanese scholar Sun Zhenqing (孫振青) contend over the following passage:

“Laws (xin 心) of compassion, all humans have this; laws of shame and disdain, all humans have this; laws of reverence and respect, all humans have this; and laws of approving and disapproving, all humans have this. The law of compassion is humaneness; that of shame and dislike is righteousness; that of reverence and

\(^{51}\) Thank you to Stephen Angle for providing helpful feedback regarding the translation of siduan as “four sprouts.” In conversation, Angle has informed me that Lee would reject a translation of duan as sprouts, due to the gradualist nature that the agricultural metaphor suggests. I agree with Angle that siduan in this context would better be translated as something like “four ends” or “four maxims.” However, as “four sprouts” has become the standard translation in Anglophone circles, I will continue to follow convention. Readers should keep in mind this difference in understanding as they continue on.

\(^{52}\) This is a fundamentally different interpretation than Froese’s reading of Mengzi, on which see Gabrielle Parke’s contribution to this volume.

\(^{53}\) 「此項基本差異在於兩者所根據的道德主體性底架構。康德底倫理學預設一個情感與理性二分的架構，而將一切情感（包括道德情感）排除於道德主體之外。」
respect is propriety; and that of approving and disapproving is wisdom. Humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not smelted onto us from outside. I inherently have (guyou) them [the four sprouts]. It is just that I had not reflected upon it until now."

My translation has attempted to capture both the items of dispute and Lee’s own interpretation. Sun’s criticism is an exegetical one; he interprets the word guyou, which I have translated as intrinsic, as connoting morality’s inborn status. In response, Lee interprets the word heart-mind as referring to the original heart-mind, having a status akin to unadulterated, pure morality. I am in agreement with David Elstein that much for Lee and his mentor Mou Zongsan rides on the interpretation of this passage. For a deontological interpretation of Confucianism, this passage establishes the entirety of the subject of morality (daodezhuti, 道德主體), needed to premise any sort of agent-based morality. I revisit this passage more explicitly in the next section.

I anticipate on part of the reader some animosity towards rendering the four sprouts as laws. Quite conveniently, Lee answers such qualms in Mengzi’s Four Sprouts Heart and Kant’s Moral Sentiments. Following a heavy exposition of Kant’s moral sentiments, Lee concludes that Kant’s treatment of reverence (jingwei, 尊敬, achtung) does not respect the strict division between sentiment and rationality.

Lee slyly crafts an extended reductio ad absurdum argument using Zhu Xi. His overall strategy revolves around illustrating how Zhu Xi’s understanding of the four sprouts as emotions (qing 情) leads to an understanding of humans as fundamentally at whims of the forming effects of various causal forces. As stated before, such understandings of Zhu Xi have a long pedigree in 20th century New-Confucian thought. As such, Lee demonstrates:

“[that] by taking Kant’s moral sentiments as the background, and examining issues with Zhu Xi’s reading of the four sprouts, we’ve exposed Zhu Xi’s doctrine as inadequate (不當) (145).”

This makes it intuitively impossible to read the four sprouts as emotions, thus collapsing the arguments of those attempting to argue otherwise. As we have adduced away the possibility of them being moral sentiments, we are left only with the option of their status as laws.

“At Kant’s Concept of ‘Happiness’ Discussing The Confucian Distinction Between Righteousness and Profit,” is perhaps the most technical paper in his compilation, albeit the most rewarding. Lee’s project in this paper is to read Kant’s concept of heterogeneity of the good into

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54 「侷隱之心，人皆有之；羞惡之心，人皆有之；恭敬之心，人皆有之；是非之心，人皆有之。侷隱之心，仁也；羞惡之心，義也；恭敬之心，禮也；是非之心，智也。仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之也，弗思耳矣。」
55 Mengzi 6A.6; translation based on Mengzi 2008, 149, slightly modified.
56 See Elstein 2015, 113.
57 「本文以康德底「道德情感」問題的討論為背景，檢討朱子在詮釋「四端之心」時所涉及，即是要凸顯朱子底義理架設之不當。」
the *Mengzi*. He puts heavy emphasis on Kant’s identification of happiness with experience. The heterogeneity of experience necessitates the heterogeneity of happiness.

Mengzi’s distinction, on Lee’s account, has less metaphysical rigor than Kant’s. He begins from various statements in the Mengzi’s including, “The gentleman resides in righteousness (yi 義); the petty person resides in profit (li 利) (147).” Lee draws the distinction between righteousness and profit quite similarly to Kant’s own distinction between the right and good. While profit might come from righteous action, “that’s not to say that righteousness necessarily yields profit as its result (188).”

Lee continues on to elaborate the differences between “private profit (sili 私利)” and “public profit (gongli 公利).” He achieves this by drawing on Mengzi’s political philosophy, as opposed to his moral philosophy. Through a close reading, Lee establishes that only public profit holds the status of normative import, while private profit does not (192-193). One might conceptualize this in Kantian terms as follows: what can be conceptualized as benefiting all can be acted upon as a perfect duty, and therefore occupies the status of morality.

I am convinced that Lee has demonstrated comparison of Confucian philosophers and Kant to be fruitful. I do wonder, however, how strong the resonance is between the two traditions, including if perhaps the very thesis of Confucianism as a deontology might be too strong, perhaps speaking over aspects of Confucianism. I take up these issues more explicitly in the next section.

**Critical Engagement: Taking the Step into Deontology**

Historically speaking, the conception of Confucianism as a deontology is clearly a result of academic construction. The terms autonomy, heteronomy and even philosophy were only introduced into China during the late 19th and 20th centuries, rendering any historical evaluation of these terms a new development. This implies that these terms could neither be found within the original Warring States Period texts, nor in later Imperial period commentaries or treatises. This of course does not prove that Confucianism is not a deontology; similar claims can be mounted against the interpretations of many Anglophone philosophers, whom Lee would view as too eager to graft the label of “virtue ethics” onto Confucianism. Rather, I am concerned with whether these categories allow Confucianism to speak for itself. The historical argument that holds together the Genealogy of the Dao, if accurate, should hold up as a forward-looking historical construct as well as a retrospective one. To make this apparent, I will draw from Anglophone Confucians, virtue ethicists, and the American inheritor of the Kantian tradition, Christine Korsgaard.

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58 「君子喻於義，小人喻於利。」
59 「也就是說，「義」不必然產生「利」。」
60 See Lee 2013.
Assuming that Confucianism is a deontological ethic, Lee leaves the reader with few clues as to discern Confucianism’s relationship with ethical formalism (xingshilunli 形式倫理 or xingshizhuyilunli 形式主義倫理). Taking Kant as the paradigm example, we find formalism clearly in his concept of maxims. In this respect, a certain act’s status as moral or not hinges on the agent’s abiding by a law given by one’s self. The importance lies in the logical value of the phrase “moral or not.” Formalistic ethics hold that morality can be encoded into affirmative/negative judgments, which arise prior to action. I propose that we consider what a formalist/autonomous Mengzi would look like, and then evaluate a merely autonomous Mengzi.

If Mengzi proposes a formalist ethic, then what form do his laws take? I believe that the Mengzi has a ready-made response for Lee to employ. Let’s revisit Mengzi 6A6:

“Laws of compassion (ceyin 側隱), all humans have this; laws of shame and disdain (xiuwu 羞惡), all humans have this; laws of reverence and respect (gongjing 恭敬) all humans have this; and feelings approving and disapproving (shifei 是非), all humans have this. The law of compassion is humaneness; that of shame and dislike is righteousness; that of reverence and respect is propriety; and that of approving and disapproving is wisdom.”

What is important for Lee is that there are two elements, each of which comprise the four sprouts. The most explicit of which is the sprout of wisdom, which has two polar opposite components, approval and disapproval. In any given situation we must either approve or disapprove, thus giving the sprout of wisdom its formalistic, logical nature. The burden therefore falls on Lee to explain the clean divisions between the other proto-sprouts; we tend less to think of shame and dislike as two diametrically opposed items, but rather items that fall on a gradualist spectrum. Likewise, it is unclear where the distinction lies in the “heartmind of compassion,” given that even modern Chinese treats the two characters that comprise “compassion” as one phrase. Of course, these are issues of any exegesis, a burden that falls on all critical scholarship.

Let’s presuppose that these eight items comprise the four sprouts. That still leaves a further question: what is the content of these laws? A (lackluster) reply might be, “A law of humaneness (仁 ren) of course!” But by no means should we be satisfied. We might further inquire, “What do laws of humaneness entail?” to which someone might instruct us to act in a certain, “humane” way. Finally, we ask, “But why does humaneness entail that action?” which does not seem to have an obvious answer. As this neither appeals to the representational facets of reason—which in Kant’s works acts as a ground for objectivity—or any other form of representation, it seems that our understanding of the sprouts relies on some form of intuitionism.\(^{61}\)

The issue is exacerbated if we accept that Confucianism is not a formalist ethic, but still an autonomous ethic. In such a case we inveigh our first question right at the beginning, to which

\(^{61}\) Additionally, this isn’t the sort of problem textual investigation can aid; an appeal to later commentators would provide little assistance, as they are simply further descriptions of the sprouts and not their actual content.
the answer is even more nebulous than in the prior scenario. By attending only to autonomy and not formalism we seem to lack a verbal structure to articulate the nature of our laws, which implies (unsatisfactory) ineffability. My criticism on this ground is one of clarity, as I see no satisfactory answer, or strictly speaking any answer, to the question, “What type of laws are they?” Laws in the western sense rely on some form of logical judgments in order to be executed upon. Putting these scenarios side by side, we see that we are left on one hand with a lack of clarity, and on the other an infinite regress.

The Double Bind of Textual Interpretation and Philosophical Progress

I would now like to shift perspectives to focus more on issues related to rendering of classical Chinese. First consider this passage that Lee cites from the Analects, which he states “contains the concept of ‘autonomy (35)’”:

“To overcome the self (克己 keji) and turn towards ritual is humaneness. If one were to one day overcome one’s self and turn towards ritual, then all under heaven would belong to them. Humaneness depends upon oneself (為人由己 weirenyouji), how could it depend on others?”

This passage’s notion of autonomy is clearly contained in the last sentence, “Humaneness depends upon oneself, how could it depend on others?” Lee however needs to make one further step by explaining the first sentence. Confucius here calls for us to “restrict the self and turn towards ritual,” society’s independent norms, conventions and institutions. Angle has explicated in detail how the forming effects of rituals can influence our “inner states”; it seems that this implies a heteronomous aspect to Confucius’s statement. It’s apparent by this reading that Confucius asks us to expand beyond what’s innate in us, not to rely on our raw autonomy.

One possible way to reconcile this apparent contradiction is to introduce Korsgaard’s notion of a “practical identity.” On her reading of Kant, to conceive of ourselves as rational is identical to conceiving of ourselves in particular relationships to our humanity, others, and our current situation. As she states,

“[A]n action requires an agent, someone to whom we attribute the movement in question as its author…. That is to say: to regard some movement of my mind or my body as my action, I must see it as an expression of my self as a whole, rather than as a product of some force that is at work on me or in me.”

Clearly, her reading differs from a solipsist reading of Kant. She is steadfast in this reading of a warmer Kant in a way that goes against a tradition of cold rationalism. Practical identities are in

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62 In a Confucian context of course. This is not to say that other traditions cannot provide clear answers to what type of laws are important.

63 「克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。為仁由己，而由人乎哉？」顏淵曰：「請問其目。」

64 Analects 14:1.

65 Angle 2012, 91-110.

66 Korsgaard 2009, 18.
this way “a description under which [the agent] values [herself] and finds [their] life worth living and ... actions to be worth undertaking.”

The analog for Confucians lies in the phrase “turn towards ritual.” In this interpretation, Confucius asks his audience to recognize ourselves in a practical identity: as humans predisposed to certain customs, norms, and social structures. This makes sense in terms of Confucius’s statement, “When attending to your parents you may remonstrate lightly. Even if you see that their commitment does not follow, respect them without wavering, and do it without complaint.” We perceive ourselves in the practical identity of a filial son/daughter, thus rendering the ostensibly heteronomous obedience towards parents instead as an authorship of action.

Of course, such an interpretation would need to account for the second half of Analects 12:1. When probed for further discussion, Confucius responds,

“Do not look at the non-ritual, do not listen to the non-ritual, do not speak of the non-ritual, do not act upon the non-ritual.”

Rituals as I have been discussing them are not completely based on our whims, desires, etc. There is a sense in which we have a say in what constitutes a proper ritual, but the objective nature of rituals does reflect our own subjective creative capacities. I will refrain from going in depth with this point for the time being, as I expand more on the topic of creativity in the next section. However these issues seem to illustrate that terms “autonomy” and “heteronomy” have limited utility insofar as they bring out aspects of Confucius’s ideas. For an autonomy-heteronomy distinction to work, it must understand human action as performed in either one way or the other, else the dichotomy collapses. But as I have illustrated, the main source of value for Confucius is not the self, but rather rituals. We can even take this one step forward by saying that overemphasizing autonomy has crowded out discussions of rituals altogether. Even if Lee is attempting to track the historical development of autonomy in the entire cannon, he must account for the prevalence of ritual in The Analects. We should be weary of if progress is even possible vis-à-vis this manner of philosophical construction.

The Four Sprouts, Laws, and Intellectual Intuition

Finally, I would like to revisit Lee’s exegesis of Mengzi 6A6. To review, I believe Lee would support the following translation:

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68 事父母幾諫。見志不從，又敬不違，勞而不怨。
69 Analects 4:18.
70 非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。
71 This is best illustrated by Analects 9:3: “The Master said, ‘Wearing the hemp cap was once ritual. Now a silk one is worn, for reasons of frugality. I follow the majority. To bow below at the outside of the hall was once ritual. Today people bow at the inside. This is arrogant. Although this goes against the majority, I follow bowing at the outside 子曰：『麻冕，禮也；今也純，儉。吾從眾。拜下，禮也；今拜乎上，泰也。雖違眾，吾從下』.” In this manner, Confucius does not create rituals, but rather interprets them. To use somewhat Hegelian language, they are pre-existing objective structures which we then subjectively endorse.
“Laws of compassion (xin 心), all humans have this; laws of shame and disdain, all humans have this; laws of reverence and respect, all humans have this; and feelings approving and disapproving, all humans have this. The law of compassion is humaneness; that of shame and dislike is righteousness; that of reverence and respect is propriety; and that of approving and disapproving is wisdom. Humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not smelted onto us from outside. I inherently have (guyou 固有) them. I perhaps had not reflected upon it until now.”

The word that interpreters will diverge on is the word xin (心). While this word also means heart-mind, it’s clear that Mengzi is not referring to the each individual xin as the locus of cognitive and conative activity. Given that Lee holds that Confucianism is an ethics of autonomy, and the four sprouts individually are laws, I assume that he would not object to my identification of each individual xin with laws in my translation.

My present criticism is a resurrection of Sun Zhenqing’s; Sun’s scrupulous reading attempts to show that the utterance, “I innately have them (woguyouzhiye 我固有之也)” just means that “I originally had them (wo benlai jiuyou 我本來就有),” or “they exist there (tamen cunzai nar 它們存在那兒) (all 89).” In his eyes, this passage alone provides shaky grounds to prove “the self to be the real establisher of laws.”

In response, Lee buttresses his reading with two other passages:

“This is the Gentleman’s nature: humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom are rooted in the heart-mind.” (7A.21)

“Seek and you will obtain, neglect it and you will lose it.” (6A.6)

The first quote is unhelpful, because it does not refer to the moral anthropology of all humans, but rather just the gentleman. Furthermore, the second half does not imply that the gentleman engages in self-legislation. By analogy, it is common to find the most regal trees—perhaps a majestic redwood or sequoia—“rooted (genyu)” in nature. But it seems that we neither ask questions about who planted them, nor do we assume that the trees planted themselves. In a similar vein of argument, we have no good reason to read 7A.21 as implying autonomy. The second passage certainly calls attention to Mengzi’s concept of freedom, but does not draw upon the creative dimension of autonomy. To “seek” or “neglect” requires us to look for something already existent, as opposed to produce it ourselves.

To elaborate on these points, I find it helpful to refer to Korsgaard’s meta-ethical taxonomy in her Sources of Normativity. Korsgaard argues that the Modern Scientific World View essentially took the West through four episodic shifts in meta-ethical theory, characterized chronologically by:

72 「自我不是真正的立法者。」
73 「君子所性，仁义理智根于心。」
1. Voluntarism: obligation derived from an external source, such as a God or monarch.
2. Realism: moral claims are true if there are “normative entities” which they can describe.
3. Reflective Endorsement: Morality finds its origin in human nature. In a sense telling us why morality is “good for us.”
4. The Appeal to Autonomy (what I will call Realistic Autonomy): the normativity of certain moral forms is generated by the agent’s will, in particular that these laws belong to the agent and obligate her.\(^{74}\)

Voluntarism fails to appeal to deontologists due to its fundamentally heteronomous nature. The legitimacy of laws cannot be traced to any satisfactory source without falling into infinite regress.\(^{75}\) Korsgaard likewise seems to respect moral realism, but acknowledges that it does not tell us the source of normativity itself. Reflective endorsement gets us closer to the Kantian position, but it does not give us the law-giving power that produces moral legitimacy.\(^{76}\) Realistic Autonomy works by taking the act of reflective endorsement, “giv[ing] us a kind of distance from our impulses...and enable[ing] us, to make laws for ourselves, and it makes those laws normative.”\(^{77}\) In other words, there must be a creative aspect involved in moral lawmaking.

After detouring through Kantian meta-ethics we can finally hone in on Lee’s interpretation. We may confidently rule out voluntarism; this is evident by Mengzi’s statement that “[the four sprouts] were not smelted onto me from outside.” This is an explicit denial that anyone could have given the four sprouts to humans. Likewise moral realism alone lacks the descriptive force to fully characterize this passage. The fact that the four sprouts exist seems to be an intuition that we start deliberation from, but no justification for them is given beyond that. Lee wants to classify the four sprouts as laws, but none of the passages he refers to contains the creative aspect that Korsgaard finds necessary for an ethic of autonomy, ruling out realistic autonomy. At most, we can say that Mengzi encourages a form of reflective engagement. To be clear, this implies that on Korsgaard’s account Confucianism is at best a heteronomous, deontological ethic.

This has implications for the integrity of Confucian intellectual intuition, and by extension this reading of Confucianism as a whole.\(^{78,79}\) The Confucian account of intellectual intuition was first corroborated by Mou Zongsan, who himself had a considerable engagement with the Kantian tradition. It is preferable for Mou and Lee to read the four sprouts as laws, as it provides an \textit{a priori}, rational, and objective and basis from which we can conclude the universal

\(^{74}\) Korsgaard 1996, 19.
\(^{75}\) Korsgaard 1996, 28-9.
\(^{76}\) Korsgaard 1996, 49-88.
\(^{77}\) Korsgaard 1996, 129.
\(^{78}\) In all honesty, I am trying to bite off more than I can chew in this discussion. I am fully aware that this is an insufficient discussion of intellectual intuition, both on the part of Kant and the New Confucians. In the interest of focusing on his book rather than my qualms with his theory, I have significantly truncated this section. English scholarship on Mou’s rendition of intellectual intuition is even scarcer. For one understanding, see Angle, 2014.
\(^{79}\) I am somewhat skeptical of Erik Hall’s notion of “metaphysical modularity” on this point; see his contribution to this volume. This notion seems to presuppose some form of pragmatism. While completely valid in its own right, I am concerned that it ignores the historical effects of modernization altogether and how it might distort our understanding of the original worldviews from which such philosophy comes from. It is in this sense that we need to balance personal progress and philosophical practice.
moral nature of humanity. While I agree that the way Mengzi comes to talk about the four sprouts may be classified as an *a priori* explanation, I hold ambivalence towards their supposed objectivity (in the sense of something stand-alone and independent) and skepticism about their relationship with rationality. While I believe that David Elstein misunderstands Lee’s reading of Mengzi by attempting to reintroduce the four sprouts as moral sentiments, his deductions put us in a position to unpack this borderline-unintelligible statement of mine. Elstein is correct that a gap exists between the *a priori* nature of the four sprouts and the universal morality that Mou and Lee profess. The latter duo’s methodology prevents us from empirically observing the four sprouts in other people; such claims would be theoretically conjectural at best. Thus, the four sprouts’ universal nature could not be realized as an objective fact, but rather an *a priori* notion that makes the moral action of others intelligible. After all, this is a strategy that Kant himself forgoes by signing on to the distinction of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge. Furthermore, if the four sprouts are not something that we create, then this raises a question about the role of rationality in moral action. This seems at the very least to disrupt how we think about their concept of sagehood.

In essence, if we want to salvage an account of Confucian Intellectual Intuition, we would need to establish more distance between the concept of Coherence (*li* 理) and rationality on the grounds of creativity; even the sage with perfect morality must accept the objective constraints of the situation, sometimes even in a way which requires a form of compromised autonomy. To see myself as fundamentally related with the world by the coherence of the heart-mind, but distinct by my individual agency means that I accept things beyond my control (*ming* 命). We should note, Mou and the Neo-Confucians emphasize the world as in a state of generative-creativity (*shengshengbuxi* 生生不息), a process in which humans take part. Drawing from Mou – I believe – Angle phrases this relationship as that,

“[t]here are ways that things fit and ways that things do not fit, and the difference is not entirely up for us to decide.... Because of the role these subjective reactions play, we can say that coherence is both objective and subjective.”

If we accept this, then we must forgo the absolute creative capacities that God has which is best described as *creatio ex nihilo*. Instead, we interpret the four sprouts as fundamentally relational, giving us our desired universal basis, and at best something that we come to voluntarily endorse. In other words, creativity for the Confucians is best described as an inherited, shared project, like how in a relay race we take the baton and run with it. This theme can be illustrated by the sentence, “They who warm the old in order to know the new are worthy of becoming teachers.” This shouldn’t give rise to any problems, as my discussion of Analects 12:2 has shown that Confucians believe in a more stable connection between types of action than the use of

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80 Elstein 2015, 114.
81 This is of course implying that we accept that there was a concept of rationality in the original Confucian texts, another issue that is highly debated by scholarship.
82 Elstein 2015, 113.
83 See Angle and Tiwald forthcoming, 29-31; and Cheng 1981, 149 for a discussion on generative-creativity.
84 Angle 2009, 35.
85 Analects, 2:11.
heteronomy and autonomy as dimensions for analysis implies. Confucian creativity is by nature communal.

**Final Remarks**

While the focus of my review has been critical of Lee’s work, even to the extent of subverting its core assumptions, interpretations, and premises, I do believe that the five essays collectively make intriguing and provocative statements about the relationship between Confucianism and Kant. Through the process of reading his work and writing this review, I have come to sincerely appreciate Lee’s inheritance of the New Confucian tradition. As a result I find myself constantly revisiting the same provocative question, “Whose olds are we warming, and to know which news?”

Alasdair MacIntyre might speak of the contemporary Confucian tradition as bifurcated on the assumptions of the terms “virtue ethics” and “deontology.” Both share the same basic texts, but rely on standards of justification internal to their respective traditions in order to make philosophical progress. For the latter, these basic intuitions about Confucianism have been compounded with China’s last century of development, caused in part by the awkward relationship of westernization with globalization. Lee’s work is emblematic of the current state of the field. The pedigree of deontological Confucianism as such does have its own history, which justifies concurrent practices. Comparative philosophy requires a certain amount of openness towards other traditions, no matter how distant – or in this case – close. As such, Anglophone Confucians should take seriously Lee’s arguments, even if they don’t agree with them.

I am sympathetic with Lee’s claim that the prevailing notion of Confucianism as a virtue ethic in the West has crowded out productive engagement with the Kantian tradition. On the topics of agency, moral luck, and the right over the good, I am convinced that Kantianism and Confucianism have a tight relationship. However I am concerned that Lee attends to the differences between them in a somewhat asymmetrical fashion, too readily signing on the terms “autonomy” and “deontology.”

In particular, I am concerned with the reading of the four sprouts as laws, which the text as he has construed it does not completely support. Compounded with the ambiguities of Confucianism’s formalistic/non-formalistic nature, the notion of intellectual intuition as Lee and Mou have developed it seems to lack the universal underpinning that supports sagehood. My engagement with Christine Korsgaard’s work demonstrates that these are not problems that can be sent back over via a series of *tu quoques*, but rather an issue internal to Lee’s tradition. As such, he bares the burden of this incongruity.

I am attracted to this work in its historical relevance and to the level of fervor, tenacity, and rigor that Lee implores in his arguments. Scholars in the west should take Lee’s theories as a healthy challenge to the common trend of comparison with Aristotle in such a way that expands interactions between national and philosophical traditions. When taken seriously, comparative philosophy creates the paradox of simultaneously illuminating our differences and drawing us

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closer together. We see that we are in fact not as similar to the other as we thought, sometimes even spurred on a chasm created by language, culture, and conceptual schemas. But the practice of finding those differences does bring us to understand our discursive partners better. Through this process we come to appreciate both the similarities and difference that comes with such philosophical challenges.
Towards a Unity of Knowledge and Action


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In his book, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge*, Warren Frisina wishes to unify knowledge and action, because he believes that this will improve “our theory of knowledge and our understanding of the self” (2). From Descartes to Kant, knowledge has always been understood to be representational: that is, there is a subject that has an experience of an object that exists out there in the world, clearly separating mind, body, and world. Knowledge is defined as one’s having a true and accurate mental representation of the external world. But this has caused problems about mind-body distinction, consciousness, subject-object relations, etc., and because of that, representationalism has received much criticism from philosophers of the analytic and pragmatist traditions who have offered nonrepresentationalist theories of knowledge. But Frisina still believes that the end of the 20th Century marks an age of epistemological crisis, because there is no consensus on a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge. Frisina hopes to change that by drawing on and comparing multiple philosophers, like Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Mark Johnson, Robert C. Neville, and at the core of it all, the Neo-Confucian, Wang Yang-ming. The real comparative work is done between those within the domains of the philosophy of language and mind versus those within the pragmatist tradition and process philosophy, where what broadly unifies them is Wang’s Neo-Confucianism. So, the book is not so much a comparison between Eastern and Western philosophy, as it is a comparison between various nonrepresentational theories of knowledge within the Western philosophical tradition, against a background that is Wang’s Neo-Confucianism. The comparative work is subtler in this sense, but still there. Ultimately, while Frisina sees much value in the nonrepresentational theories of knowledge that come from the analytic tradition, he believes that we need to move away from the “linguistic turn,” and instead, engage in an “organicist turn”—which Johnson and Neville have done, following Dewey and Whitehead. This is not to say that analytic philosophers have nothing to offer in this respect, only that rather than seeing human beings strictly as language-speakers, we must view ourselves as organisms as well. While the book largely succeeds in achieving its goals, I think an ‘organicist turn’ is only part of the puzzle: for there also needs to be a ‘phenomenological turn.’

The reason why I say that Wang’s Neo-Confucianism unites the various nonrepresentational theories of knowledge is because it is Wang’s idea of the unity of knowledge and action (知行合一 or *zhi xing he yi*) that plays as the central motif of this book: the Western philosophies are only used to accentuate this idea, and make us see it in the various analytic, pragmatist, and process philosophies. The chapters of the book are actually very logically structured in that it is split into three parts: after the problem is contextualized (Part I), Frisina
takes us back to the 15th Century, where Wang’s Neo-Confucianism is brought back to life through the problem of representationalism (chapter 4). And it is no coincidence that the chapter dedicated to Wang’s doctrine is right in the center of the book (literally), holding the book and all of its philosophies together. Chapters 1 to 3 (Part I) focus on the analytic and post-analytic philosophies of Taylor, Davidson, Rorty, and Dennett, which more or less serve as the historical context as to how the problem of representationalism has been responded to, and rejected. In effect, Frisina shows how such philosophers have taken the “linguistic turn” in their approach to the problem. Frisina’s inspiration for the book came from studying Wang’s philosophy as he saw how it resonated with Rorty’s in dealing with the problem of representationalism (9). Part II (composed of three chapters dedicated to Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead) is what Frisina thinks are the three ways in which we can also solve the problem, with different metaphysical foundations that is: “I have been arguing that these three figures [Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead] bring to the conversation alternative metaphysical visions that render plausible the nonrepresentational approach to epistemological questions” (71). Part III (or chapters 7, 8, and 9) aims to reconcile Part I and II, because the philosophies of Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead may seem prescientific, as they can be seen as panspsychist (142). Many may see Frisina as returning to a pseudo-scientific philosophy, where the rest of us following the analytic and post-analytic traditions have taken the scientific-turn; and Part III aims to convince us that this kind of ‘panspsychism’ is not unscientific. The chapters on the contemporary philosophers, Johnson and Neville, emphasize the organicist, bodily theories behind human cognition and experience to show how nonrepresentational theories are moving beyond the realms of language and mind, into a type of panspsychism that has scientific backing.

Analytic and post-analytic philosophers who have taken a liking to the linguistic turn in epistemology reject an internal self that internally represents (i.e. has some sort of private mental representation) the world. Knowing is not a Cartesian disengagement—or as Dennett would say, “a Cartesian theatre”—from the world, but a communal, active, participating involvement defined by and construed through language. There is a huge emphasis on the way language normatively and rationally structures the world, that is, we always already happen to see, think about, and conceive of the world in a ‘language.’ Beliefs, utterances, and practices are normative all the way down. The self is not some disengaged entity that observes from a distance, but is actively involved in its everyday dealings and interactions in the world: that is our epistemological foundation, according to the analytic and post-analytic philosophers. The organicists share the same concerns, but their method of approach is different, where the emphasis is not just on us as discursive beings, but as organisms as well.

Rorty and Davidson claim that language is our way of going about the world meaningfully, constantly adjusting our language according to our engagements and interactions in the world. To use Rorty’s words, language—or rather, metaphors—are tools to cope with our surroundings, readjusted to changes in relations to things. The self is a contingent web of beliefs/conceptual scheme that bears a direct, engaged, and interlinking relation to the world, distinguishable but not separate. Instead of having a mental representation of the world, that then goes on to form our bodies of knowledge, we actively exhibit a constant and changing relatedness to the world through our normative and rational understanding of it (i.e. via language), which is situational/context-sensitive.
Nevertheless, those who have taken the linguistic turn do not talk much about the self as a body, and thus, any sort of engaged mindedness, or intentional directedness, is not an embodied one. The organicists do do this. In other words, analytic and post-analytic philosophers emphasize the relational status of human beings in a normatively structured nexus of worldly interactions and relationships, but this is an incomplete form of mindedness. The mindedness ought to be embodied as well, meaning it ought to involve our bodily and perceptual skills in these worldly engagements and interactions. Frisina is essentially saying that the former (following Wittgenstein, Quine, and all the other top-dogs) did not go far enough. There needs to be a organicist turn in our post-post-analytic age, where a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge does not just involve our discursive capacities, but also our bodily capacities—especially if we are to see knowledge and action as one thing. It is not just our beliefs, utterances, and practices, but also our physical bodily comportments that fundamentally unifies knowledge and action.

The organicist turn is a metaphysical alternative to the same epistemological problem of representationalism—one that takes bodily comportments more seriously, as it were. But first, a little background on Wang’s epistemology. Wang believed that his Confucian predecessors and ancestors had come to academic dead ends, because they did not understand knowledge (76). Frisina says:

“[Confucians] had made a fundamental epistemological mistake at the beginning of their studies. By assuming they could study questions first and then put their knowledge into action, they missed the essential point that they had to begin by renovating themselves…. The quest for sagehood could not begin with abstract knowledge because it required a new existential beginning…. Knowledge, according to Wang, is not just ‘in the head’; it is a way of being in relation to that which is real.” (76)

Wang did not want his students to focus on learning before action; to him, they were one and the same thing, cultivated at the same time. Note that this kind of knowledge is not confined to practical knowledge (otherwise, he would not have disagreed with his Confucian predecessors), but ‘knowledge’ broadly construed to include ‘cognitive knowledge’ as well—but of course, given that knowledge is always a form of action, there is no such thing as pure cognitive knowledge (75). Thus, Wang believed that knowledge could not be split into practical and cognitive knowledge, because it was always already a form of action. To gain knowledge is to comport towards the world “existentially”, such that knowledge is not something “in the head” but in the very relation one is in with respect to one’s surroundings and situation. Revising knowledge always requires “a new existential beginning,” in the sense that one revises one’s active relation to the world. This is similar to Rorty and Davidson’s ideas of our web of beliefs/conceptual schemes being our way to cope/organize the world, respectively—except for Wang, it is not so much language that does this, as it is our whole “self” and its bodily (as well as discursive) comportments. An “existential beginning” is not simply a revision of one’s web of beliefs/conceptual scheme—or language in general, for that matter—but also one involving our active engagement and physical relation to the world.

Gaining and revising knowledge always requires a self-revision, “in an effort to attain the sincerity of will that enables us to deal with the world truly” (76). Knowledge is neither about
contemplation nor discovery, but about being in the right state in order to successfully, that is, truthfully, comport towards the world. This is so that we can deal with the world, which is not a passive seeing into the world (i.e., the traditional Cartesian notion of knowledge). Wang’s doctrine was a metaphysical revision as much as it was an epistemological one. Just as the subject-object dichotomy is done away with, so is the theoretical versus practical knowledge distinction. Wang’s doctrine of unity of knowledge and action is based upon various metaphysical presuppositions (five to be exact) (78-89), but all can be characterized by the dynamic character of being within a dynamic universe.

Against a constantly changing universe, one’s being fluctuates between dynamic movement and tranquility, producing yang and yin, respectively. There is “ontological continuity between human existence and nature,” such that there is a “link between a dynamic universe and a dynamic [xin]” (80); xin (心), is the thing that fluctuates between dynamism and tranquility, and which is the Chinese character for ‘heart-mind.’ This notion of xin is integral to Wang’s doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action, because it captures both the physical and mental aspects of our being, and conjoins them under one concept. Xin is not just one’s mind, nor is it just one’s heart, but both. It is no wonder that xin, a concept that bridges the mental and the physical, is at the center of Wang’s doctrine that unites the mental (knowledge) and the physical (action). And it is through the sage’s ability to establish tranquility amidst a dynamic universe that he/she becomes knowledgeable. Our being is aligned with the movements of our xin, and because of that, cannot be said to operate in distinctly mental and physical realms—there is only a dynamic universe that is patterned in such a way that we can establish harmony with it through our synchronized xin (80).

Frisina uses the concepts of yin and yang to illustrate this dynamic character of our being and the things that constitute the universe:

“[T]he things that make up the universe should be understood as the interaction of vibrating wave patterns of yin contraction and yang extension.... On this view, each entity is a rhythmic pattern of yin/yang alternations. Resonating with one another, such patterns form the unceasing movements of [taiji/太極]” (80-81).

Everything exists in relation to another: there is ontological interdependence between and among entities. Thus, “[k]nowing is always a way of adjusting to patterned movements, rather than a grasping of the essence of an independent entity” (82). Frisina gives a beautiful example of Wang’s student trying to understand what Wang says by letting one’s xin awaken the colors of a flower, which is not to say that the student has to reduce the flower to a mental representation—it is exactly the opposite. The student must comport towards the flower not as the ‘knower’ trying to grasp an entity, but as one whose being is not disengaged from the world, but always already amidst entities, which are disclosed as such-and-such in one’s being-towards them. It is this constant relatedness of being (between the student and the flower) that calls for the removal of the dichotomy between the ‘knower’ and the ‘known.’ Everything is interdependent and cannot exist apart from the whole nexus, meaning that there is no subject and object separation, because there can be no ‘mind’ that engages with the world from a distance, that is, passively and statically forms mental representations of an external world; one is always being-in-the-world,
and therefore cannot take an ‘objective’ stance over and above it, as if one could be somehow separated from it. One is truly “one body with all things.”

The sense of ontological harmony Wang wants to advocate for necessitates that he believes that knowledge and action are one thing. And now, to offer metaphysical alternatives that also advocate for this notion: Dewey’s pragmatism and Whitehead’s process philosophy. Dewey’s ideas of primary versus secondary experience emphasize the distinction between precognitive and cognitive experience of the world, respectively: “Primary experience is the immediate precognitive response of an organism, human or otherwise, to its environment. As such it contains what Dewey called the ‘affectional’ and ‘volitional’ dimensions of experience” (95). Frisina also says that the linkage between Dewey’s metaphysics and epistemology can be summed up in three sentences: “1). Existence is inherently dynamic because entities are patterns of interactions rather than independent substances (back to the idea of an organismic causal nexus). 2). Experience is a specific kind of interactional pattern within the wider interactions constituting individual entities and the universe at large. 3). Knowledge is a species of experience and therefore also a specific kind of interactional pattern” (101). To continue to use Dewey’s terms, organisms have an equilibrium to maintain, so, for example, an amoeba’s equilibrium would be if it is in a state where it does not need to feed, and disequilibrium when it is hungry. Organisms are living because they can constantly fluctuate in this way between equilibrium and disequilibrium, which is a process that can be used to describe knowledge acquisition as well. The experience of gaining knowledge is like that of restoring oneself back into a state of equilibrium that is ontologically continuous with one’s environment. Dewey is not saying that all experience is physicalist, in that all experience can be defined physically, chemically, and biologically, only that experience emerges from it. In other words, all secondary experience (i.e. cognition or a state of inquiry) emerges from primary experience, the latter of which is a product of the physical processes constituting the organism and its environment. One does not have knowledge; one inquires and constantly seeks it in order to restore equilibrium. We engage in inquiry to adapt to changing situations that call for a successful ongoing relationship with things that constitute our environment. Intellectual activity is very much in continuity with organic activity. An organism is constantly anticipating and adapting to its circumstances, no matter what mode of activity it is engaged in.

Likewise, Whitehead’s idea of “causal efficacy” highlights our more basic, emotional responses to the world, which are prior to ‘sense data’ (95); this fundamental mode of experience is also a kind of pre-linguistic, precognitive, organismic way of being in the world, where “powerful emotional feelings underlying our sense of continuity with the world” precede sense-data cognition (95). Frisina says on page 130: “In causal efficacy the entityprehends the past, incorporating it into its own self-actualization. Then, in presentational immediacy, it reworks the data acquired in causal efficacy. Thus, presentational immediacy is dependent on causal efficacy,” meaning that external forces do not impose sense data, but are actively re-worked into one’s present from the immediate past. For there to be experience in the mode of presentational immediacy (i.e. one’s present), the prehending entity must act in such a way as to make it possible. Since precognitive experience is the foundation of cognitive experience, knowledge is a form of action, given that precognitive experience of an organism is an active engagement, adaptation, anticipation, and responsiveness to its environment. The two are not separated by mental representations, because there is a sort of full immersion where the organism must make
its way around the world such that there is mastery over the physical terrain. Note that this immersion is a bodily immersion, which is full of patterned, law-like, organismic interactions and interrelations with the environment. Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead all offer accounts of precognitive experience that collapse the dichotomy between subject and object, between knowledge and action. However, it is crucial to note that unlike Wang, Dewey and Whitehead are emphasizing causal relations, where an organism's biological make-up and its environment elicit a specific responsiveness.

The brilliance of Frisina’s book comes from his methodology for comparison, and the way he uses Wang’s Neo-Confucianism to connect the analytic and post-analytic philosophies to the pragmatist and process philosophies. Comparative philosophy can be extremely challenging, in that one not only has to provide a clear exposition of what one is trying to compare, but also enable the reader to see the connections—and whether there are connections there to begin with. Frisina has masterfully compared various philosophical traditions not by pitting them against another side-by-side the whole way through, but by talking about each individually and gradually and subtly invoking each of the other traditions. The reader does not rely on the author to explicitly state how one idea is similar to another, but simply starts to see the similarities on their own as more of the individual philosophies are explained. And the way Frisina structures his book is crucial for this, because it is as if the reader is taken on a historical, albeit non-chronological, journey into the problem of representationalism, and begins to see how the various ‘nonrepresentational’ theories can be unified with Wang’s doctrine of zhi xing he yi. As the reader turns the pages from Part I to Part II, he/she is turning from the linguistic and turning into the organicist.

Frisina’s methodology is ingenious, because it does not need direct one-to-one comparisons between Eastern and Western philosophies. This is not to say that Frisina does not make explicit comparisons and connections, only that he does not rely on such statements to draw out the connections—they are embedded within the text for the reader to discover and realize, without actually needing Frisina to use ostensive statements. The comparative work is subtle and requires the reader’s active engagement with the text to make the ultimate judgment as to whether the philosophies converge/diverge. A beautiful piece of comparative work has an enigmatic quality to it, such that if the reader has enough information and background knowledge, the ‘mystery’ begins to reveal itself and the connections emerge more visible. And in this respect, Frisina almost succeeds, because (at least in my case) concepts and ideas were not sufficiently explained for me to see all the connections there are to see. In other words, I was not familiar enough with the material to see as Frisina does. But more about this point later on.

Chapter 4 about Wang’s Neo-Confucianism may seem a little disjointed from the previous three chapters, but as one reads on, the concepts and ideas antecedent re-emerge in a new form. For example, Frisina writes:

87 The reason I put “nonrepresentational” in quotes is because the philosophies of Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead cannot actually be called nonrepresentational for they were not responses to representational theories of knowledge, but still, they offer relevant, important, and original insights into the problem, that could potentially point us in a more fruitful (organicist) direction.
“[Xīn] is the locus of creativity within the individual. [Xīn] is the place wherein we create who we are by determining our relations with others will be…[Xīn’s] creativity...is the creation of harmonic patterns...they are the patterns linking us to the world at large” (92).

This passage reminded me of the talk about Rorty and metaphors, where the latter are used to cope with our environment. Metaphors being our spontaneous creative outlet in interacting and coping with the world around, there are many similarities to be drawn to Wang’s Neo-Confucianism. Our relation to things in the world are reconstructed through metaphor for Rorty, and through xīn for Wang; even though one is focused on language, while the other on ontology, there are metaphysical similarities that point towards a general non-representationalism. In both cases, one is always already responsive to one’s environment and changing situation, constantly trying to establish harmonic relations with the patterns in the world, whether these be the normatively and rationally structured nexus or yīn/yáng alternations in the universe—the point is to see the self not as a disengaged, separate substance/entity from the world at large, but an involved, coping, relational being-in-the-world. The emphasis is on the living rather than the self that lives it (20).

It helps to know that Frisina is not just trying to let us see for ourselves the similarities among various philosophical traditions with respect to the question about representationalism vs. non-representationalism, but also to point us in a new, unexplored direction: i.e. to take an organicist approach in developing a non-representational theory of knowledge. In other words, the comparative work is done for the sake of a larger, unfinished project, which is to shift our philosophical attention entirely, to take us off the linguistic path in our quest for a non-representational theory of knowledge. Frisina’s book is structured so as to simulate this transition: Part I is where we are now with the philosophy of language and mind center-stage with regard to non-representationalism; Part II aims to draw inspiration from other important, if not more important, traditions; Part III is where to proceed next. While I believe that Frisina’s is one of the best comparative philosophy methodologies I have encountered, for some reason I was not entirely convinced by his argument—that we ought to take an organicist turn if we are to solve the problem of representationalism. This is not to say that I prefer the linguistic turn—I see problems there too, which Frisina has eloquently highlighted—, it is just that I am not sure that the next best alternative is the organicist turn. Below, I will explain why that is the case, and consider whether Frisina could have changed that by making changes to his book.

Being fairly familiar with Davidson and Dennett (not so much Rorty), I had no trouble with Frisina’s arguments in Part I. I also agreed with the shortcomings of taking the linguistic turn, in that there is much more to be accounted for in a complete non-representational theory of knowledge (e.g. bodily comportments). And here, my views diverge from Frisina’s, because I do not think that viewing us as organisms offers a fully satisfying theory of nonrepresentationalism. Note that all I can say is that from my understanding of Part II, I am unconvinced; perhaps if Frisina had significantly expanded on the notes section, I would have a better understanding of Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead’s arguments and thus why they may be more adequate non-representational theories of knowledge. There were a lot of concepts in this section that required outside research, and I had the impression that Frisina intended for his audience to be extremely well-read on these philosophical traditions. Being totally unfamiliar with Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead’s philosophies, I had trouble grasping their ideas as put forth by Frisina. Without
further elaboration, I think Frisina (intentionally) limits his audience. It does seem appropriate
though, given the fact that his project is not so much to offer a complete, unified non-
representational theory of knowledge—for it does not—, as it is to propose a new way of
approaching the problem. I think he is trying to get the attention of his contemporaries, for they
are the ones actually developing and publishing these theories. In other words, his target
audience is the modern-day philosopher (or the very knowledgeable philosophy student),
whereas I am the passive spectator who can merely be intrigued by his insights. This may be
the reason why I am not entirely convinced by Frisina’s arguments, because I do not have the
requisite background knowledge. And yet, I do not want to give Frisina too much benefit of the
doubt, because I think that good (comparative) philosophical work still needs adequate
explanations of the concepts it draws upon—whether that be by writing a longer book, extending
the notes, etc. By the end of the book, after reading every single word Frisina had written, there
was still something missing, as if he had left out a few steps of his working and had just written
down the answer.

I am more inclined to say that I believe that knowledge and action cannot be separated
from one another, that there is no dualism there, but they can still be distinguished—and
therefore, they are not really one thing. To really convince me that the latter is the case, Frisina
would have to make clear the distinction between conscious, deliberative action, and expert-like
know-how, and talk about what kind of knowledge we have in the two cases. Frisina repeatedly
says that knowledge is not about abstract thinking, but about being in the right relations to things,
and constantly adjusting those relations depending on one’s situation. This is the case with
conscious and deliberative action—knowledge is a form of action in this respect. To have a true
propositional belief, one needs to be situated correctly within the normatively and rationally
structured matrix that is the world, meaning that one comports in the correct and appropriate
way—it is an active engagement within the world that gives one knowledge. Whether it be talk
of patterns in the world, or equilibriums/desequilibrms, or causal efficacies, the conclusion is
the same: knowledge is a form of action, insofar as action is construed as a practical engagement
with the world that requires being in the right sort of relations with it. But action as a kind of
know-how, where one is not conscious of how one makes one’s way around the world, even
though one does so successfully, is different. For example, simply engaging in mundane,
everyday tasks does not require an active engagement/comportment, for one already knows how
to be-in-the-world; the adjustments and readjustments in relational status is not a ‘knowing’ but
already a know-how. That is why I am not entirely convinced by Frisina’s arguments, especially
the ones inspired by Dewey and Whitehead: viewing ourselves as organisms ironically does not
go into the depth I want Frisina to go into, because viewing ourselves as organisms does not
exactly raise the right questions: e.g. what kind of knowledge is in the form of action we
recognize as know-how? It does not get at the normativity of everyday actions. An organicist
turn may seem to significantly broaden our approach to the question of non-representationalism,
but from what I understand from chapters 5 and 6, all Frisina is essentially saying is that
cognitive experience is grounded in and emerges from non-cognitive experience, which is
organismic in nature, i.e. fundamentally physical, chemical, and biological. In other words, we
can only think of ourselves as a ‘self’, because the world/universe is constituted of natural
organisms and entities, which form the interconnected nexus that is first and foremost physical,
and then normative. Sure, Frisina is offering a microscopic view into the question of non-
representationalism that argues that all organisms are interrelated qua organisms, but that is still
an incomplete account of *our* normative relations in the world. I still cannot accept that knowledge and action are one and the same thing, literally, if Frisina simply takes the organicist turn. Both the organicist and linguistic turn are insufficient. I believe that one needs to also take a phenomenologist turn (esp. following John Haugeland), and think about our practical, bodily comportments not just naturalistically, but normatively as well. To put my point another way, I am saying that Frisina falls into his own trap, where after criticizing Taylor, Davidson, Rorty, and Dennett for focusing too much on language, focuses too much on seeing the world as composed of organicist relations and Neo-Confucian ontological and metaphysical theories, which however true, are themselves only a part of the puzzle. Frisina himself, like those who have taken the linguistic turn, does not go far enough.

This is where I think Wang has the capacity to do more work for Frisina than Dewey and Whitehead. Wang does not so much emphasize an ‘organicist’ turn, because his idea of the unity of knowledge and action is not a naturalist one. It is not a view of us as organisms. While there are definitely similarities, Wang’s Neo-Confucianism is about establishing harmonic relations with the patterns in the universe, which goes beyond an organism’s interactive, immediate responsiveness to its environment. There is a comparable level of dynamicity in all three accounts, but for Wang, *xin* is inherently creative, and the locus of a morally sincere will; that is, there is a distinctly human character to our being which transcends that of organisms. There is an aspect of moral harmony for Wang, which is different from a mere organismic interconnectedness. Frisina’s book does not go far enough, because there is too much emphasis on an organicist turn, whereas the focus ought to be broadened out to phenomenology as well, which I believe Wang’s Neo-Confucianism would be more aligned with. In other words, to do Wang’s Neo-Confucianism justice, I think Frisina would not only have to expand the notes section, but also incorporate more in the discussion, such that Wang’s ideas do not seem to just be in the background, but play a more active, critical role. Frisina, in putting most of the emphasis on reconstructing our notion of knowledge, fails to mention that Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead have different ideas of action (as I said, action for Wang is also moral action). In addition to knowledge being an ‘active’ inquiry and not some detached, abstract mental representation of some ‘thing’ (which all three philosophers agree on), action as something one actually does in the context of social practices is crucial for Wang—this aspect of *action* is not simply organismic. Frisina should have elaborated on the implicitly embedded ideas of normativity in Wang’s Neo-Confucianism, which I believe he calls “patterns” (the “dynamic patterns of the universe” are not just the physical laws of nature, but also our ways of being in the world that are distinctly human; e.g. think of the concept of *li*).

Readers may think that Frisina and I are ‘Westernizing’ Wang’s ideas, and to an extent, that is true. But I think Frisina is trying to show how reading Wang has inspired him to solve the problem of representationalism—which can be considered a ‘Western’ philosophical problem—in a different way. My criticism is simply that Frisina does not incorporate Wang’s philosophy sufficiently by advocating for more than a mere “organicist turn.” I would even go so far to say that given the argument he presents in the book as it stands, Frisina could have taken out chapter 4 and still have a very consistent and well-constructed piece of philosophical work. I previously said that Frisina uses Wang’s Neo-Confucianism to tie it all together, but it is not so much Wang’s philosophy as it is his *idea* of the unity of knowledge and action. There is room for growth here.
In fact, Part II does not do the synthesizing work Frisina intends, but actually makes more evident the contrasts between Wang’s Neo-Confucianism and the ‘organicist turn’. I am not invalidating their similarities, just the way Frisina integrates both of them in his project. Wang’s philosophy could do a lot more work for him if there was less of an emphasis on us as organisms. That being said, the idea of unity of knowledge and action is well-established as the connecting factor among the various philosophies discussed in the book. And while the idea is well-justified as well, it is not fully convincing because there is definitely more to be said on behalf of Wang, whether that be through an extension of his philosophical ideas by virtue of contemporary phenomenology, or just an elaboration of his ideas, which would most likely require a revision of the phrase, “organicist turn.” In other words, the idea of the unity of knowledge and action could do without chapter 4, because Dewey, Whitehead, Johnson, and Neville have good arguments for that; the question is what work does chapter 4 do, if not to just reiterate the idea. Chapters 5 and 6 seem to fundamentally diverge from chapter 4, even though they are similar in that they support Wang’s idea of unity. Another way to put this is that Frisina wants us to see knowledge as a form of action, and see how this idea originated from Wang’s Neo-Confucianism; nevertheless, comparative philosophy seems to need more than that, more than citing a spark of inspiration. It must be comparative, and even though Wang’s idea permeates throughout, chapter 4, as an account of Wang’s philosophy, seems to stand on its own. It is as if Wang’s idea inspired Frisina search within the Western philosophical tradition for this idea of unity of knowledge and action, until finally Frisina stumbled upon the organicists. Wang may have enabled Frisina to see the connections within the philosophies of Dewey, Whitehead, Johnson, and Neville, but I had wished to see more of a synthesis between Wang and the other philosophers, besides just through the core principle of zhi xing he yi. In other words, I wanted to see how Wang’s Neo-Confucianism, not just his idea within it, connected to the other philosophies, and if through the former, one could actually advocate for an ‘organicist turn’.

Not to mention, I do not think that the notion of precognitive experience is a Neo-Confucian one, but only a Deweyan and Whiteheadian one—and this in itself is problematic. Unlike Dewey and Whitehead, philosophers like Noë, Haugeland, and Rouse argue that conceptual understanding runs all the way through perception. There is no such thing as precognitive perception/experience, because one just needs to remember what Wilfrid Sellars said in Empiricism and The Philosophy of Mind about the given—there is no such thing as pure, raw sense data causally impacting our sense receptors. We always already conceive of the world as “such-and-such,” to borrow John McDowell’s phrase. Here, in addition to taking a ‘phenomenologist’ turn, one can still take an organicist turn following Rouse’s idea of biological normativity (see Toward a New Naturalism). While there is the panpsychist aspect to Wang’s philosophy, which is the reason why Frisina compares him to Dewey and Whitehead, to provide a better argument for the unity of knowledge and action, I think it is necessary to get rid of talk about precognitive experience. And unfortunately, this idea does seem integral to the philosophies of Dewey and Whitehead, especially in arguing for the unity of knowledge and action.

88 “An environment in this sense is not a physical region, but is instead configured and bounded by how its ongoing way of life takes up aspects of its surroundings. Understanding organism and environment as closely coupled shows how organisms can track and flexibly respond to multiple environmental cues, without needing representational intermediaries. Such perceptual and practical capacities are adaptively directed toward and responsive to a selective configuration of the organism’s physical environment without being intentional....” Rouse 2016, 33.
action, and so Frisina may indeed have to take them out altogether, and replace them with the aforementioned contemporary (Heideggerian) ‘phenomenologists.’ I believe their accounts of nonrepresentationalism are objectively stronger (but which extends beyond the scope of this essay). Plus, they get at the normativity of our being in the world, which I believe is extremely important to see in connection and relation with Wang’s Neo-Confucianism. Yet I would still be open to the possibility of incorporating the ‘organicists,’ if and only if their arguments can be reconciled with contemporary phenomenological ideas of perception and conception as just proposed (I do see the value in establishing panpsychist connections among Wang, Dewey, and Whitehead).

It was not just the general connection between the organicists and Wang I wanted to see more fully developed, but also the argument for the unity of knowledge and action. That is, a chapter or two on our perceptual and practical capacities involved in know-how would have provided a more complete argument for the unity of knowledge and action. Here, I think Frisina would have greatly benefitted if he had expanded his book to include the philosophies of Alva Noë, John Haugeland, and Joseph Rouse (who in fact takes a comparable ‘organicist turn’ in his philosophy; see Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image). These philosophers have departed from the ‘linguistic turn’ and improved upon it by offering a more encompassing non-representational theory of knowledge, broadening the discussion to a conceptualizing of the world with respect to our normative positions and social practices. In the end, I am not saying that Frisina has not produced a brilliant piece of comparative work that successfully integrates Wang’s idea of the unity of knowledge and action within a very broad range of philosophical traditions, executed with an ingenious methodology: but I believe that the connections between ‘organicism’ and Wang’s Neo-Confucianism, taken as two philosophies, needs further elaboration; it was not enough for them to simply be tied together by Wang’s notion of zhi xing he yi. And because of that, chapter 4, while being at the center of his work (literally and metaphorically), could have been removed without much harm done to the argument that knowledge and action are the same thing. Secondly, the argument itself needed more than Dewey, Whitehead, Johnson, and Neville’s organicism. As Frisina says so himself at the end of his book, the project is unfinished. And to this extent I think Frisina does succeed, for he does what many would either not see in the first place, or simply not do out of a content with their current views to realize the detriment of such views: that is, Frisina points us in the right direction.
Varieties of Comparison


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Owen Flanagan positions his new book, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility*, as something of a sequel to his prior book, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. This prior book, according to Flanagan was meant to “advance an emerging conversation between philosophers and psychologists by introducing moral philosophers to relevant work from psychology, work on temperament, personality types, different conceptions of the self and identity, moral development, gender and morality, social psychology, and the virtues” (2). As Flanagan suggests, the aim of this book is not very different, if slightly expanded. The goal here is still to “advance an emerging conversation between philosophers and psychologists” with regards to the validity of various moral principles, but it in this new book Flanagan has expanded his scope still further. Specifically, now Flanagan wishes to incorporate perspectives on moral traditions from, “cultural history, sociology, and anthropology,” and more broadly from cross-cultural philosophy (4). In essence Flanagan’s argument and thesis for his book, as presented in his introductory chapter, is that devoting another book to further advancing the “emerging conversation between philosophers and psychologists” with regards to moral thinking is a productive goal (2).

After his introduction Flanagan moves on to the beginning of the first main section of his book, a section comprised of several chapters primarily concerns with various ideas relating to “sprout theories” and other ideas of “first nature.” One of the first relevant theories discussed in this section is that of Darwinian evolution. However, Flanagan is not interested in going over the specifics of how finches in certain environments lead to other finches or how a certain type of homo erectus at a certain time in history discovered fire. Rather, Flanagan is more concerned with the use of evolutionary theory as a guiding principle on how to, in his words, “think in ecological Darwinian terms” (39). The main argument here is that being able to think in Darwinian ecological terms is a helpful and important skill for considering ideas of first nature. Thinking this way involves thinking of beings as individuals belonging to a variety of micro ecologies (a family, neighborhood, classroom etc.) rather than just part of a broader national structure (or an even broader east vs. west dichotomy), and understanding that individuals have a level of normal variation which is more diverse and complex than some ultimate goal of bettering one’s species (39).

Throughout the next two chapters Flanagan continues to explore the topic of first nature by introducing Mencius and his theory concerning the four innate human sprouts of benevolence, ritual propriety, righteousness, and wisdom (89). Flanagan goes on to, over the course of these two chapters, compare Mencius’ “four sprout” theory to more contemporary modules of morality
like the one described by Jonathan Heidt, which consists of: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (90). The main argument here is that not only is Mencius’ four sprout theory a relevant, important aspect of studying first natures, it’s also an idea/theory which is heavily reflected in many modern concepts of moral modularity.

Moving on to the second main section of the book, here Flanagan presents us with, and ultimately attempts to defend, a certain Buddhist concept of anger. Specifically Flanagan goes into detail about a theory one could think of as an eliminivist view of anger. In essence, the idea here is that anger, in all forms, is better of being eliminated (267). Anger, contrary to common western intuition, may not be necessary at all, and not only is it possible to not experience anger, such a lifestyle is a goal one ought to strive for. The main argument made here by Flanagan is that this eliminivist view of anger should be taken seriously by all those exploring morality, even westerners to which the idea may seem initially foreign.

Finally, in the third main section of his book, Flanagan addresses various conceptions of relationships between others and between an individual and the self. Some examples of relevant theories discussed are the concept of the No-Self, and the psychological concept of the fundamental attribution error (402). The main argument made here seems to be that various conceptions of the self exist and that—as can be seen when comparing conceptions of the No-self with instances of the fundamental attribution error—learning all of these conceptions can be helpful as they often interact with or provide insight about each other (409).

Before delving further into the particulars, or evaluating the successes, of *The Geography of Morals*, it seems pertinent to first clarify what Flanagan means by his title. While morality is of great interest to Flanagan and is, in many ways, the focus of his book, the more important, and distinct, part of the author’s mission is tied to this idea of geography. Geography, for Flanagan seems to extend beyond its most literal interpretation: a survey of moral ideas and attitudes from a variety of distinct spaces throughout the globe. Flanagan is interested in, and fills up large portions of his book with, such a survey, but there is another aspect to the author’s analysis that should not be ignored. Flanagan’s ultimate goal for *The Geography of Morals* is most clearly expressed in this quote from the beginning of his introductory chapter, “The aim [of the book] is to extend the argument for ethical inquiry that absorbs the insights of the human sciences and contributes to the human sciences, by bringing some of the main recent advances in culturally attuned moral psychology into conversation with cross-cultural or comparative philosophy” (2).

From this quote is seems appropriate to come to two conclusions about Flanagan. Firstly, it seems clear that while Flanagan’s interests and topic of choice fall under the umbrella of morality, what sets him apart is his willingness and enthusiasm for engaging in comparative philosophy. One might say that the elements of *Geography of Morals* which are most interesting, and unique, are those which stem from Flanagan the comparative philosopher, rather than Flanagan the moralist. Secondly, this excerpt, as well as the rest of the introductory chapter it sits in, introduces us to what is perhaps the most fascinating part of *The Geography of Morals*: Flanagan is not only interested in comparing philosophies to philosophies (i.e. western vs. eastern, classic vs. contemporary, etc.), but is also set on including a variety of psychological findings/theories in the conversation as well.
Having established that Flanagan intends to compare and contrast cross-cultural moral philosophies with psychological theories, it seems now necessary to establish both whether or not this is a valid idea worth pursuing, as well as whether Flanagan throughout the rest of his book implements this strategy successfully. Answering the former question requires us to look closely at Flanagan’s meta-thesis: that there is value in comparing various moral philosophies and psychological theories. Let us first tackle this question from the perspective of someone who is primarily a philosopher, but wishes to engage with relevant psychological theories. The argument that Flanagan uses to defend such a person essentially boils down to the idea that there is inherent value in having at least a rudimentary fluency in the topic with which one’s philosophy is engaged. Specifically, Flanagan uses the analogy of a philosopher who wishes to write or teach about philosophy of the law. It seems obvious that such a person should invest in the time necessary for at least a basic understanding of the structures and intricacies of the law. Flanagan then, seems to be suggesting that certain psychological theories are just as fundamental to moral philosophy as jury selection processes are to philosophy of law. The obvious question then is whether or not this is a false equivalency? In short, it is and it isn’t. No, psychological theories on morality are not as integral to moral philosophy as the legal system is to philosophy of law. Philosophy of law is a branch of philosophy where the law is the philosopher’s subject. Moral philosophy is not philosophy about moral psychology, rather it is a philosophy about morals, which moral psychology is also about. In other words, whereas Flanagan’s analogy suggests a linear A to B relationship between moral philosophy and moral psychology (similar to that of philosophy of law and the legal system) the truth is that the two are more accurately two points each leading two a third apex of morality. With that said, just because Flanagan’s analogy is an ultimately misleading oversimplification does not mean that his main point is invalid. Even if engaging with moral psychology is, arguably, not strictly necessary when writing moral philosophy, it can still be incredibly helpful and insightful to do so. In fact, one could make the argument that engaging in any sort of comparative philosophy at all is not strictly necessary. But, if you are a more open and progressive philosopher, as Flanagan is, it becomes clear that engaging in all sorts of moral theories, whether they come from Buddhists or enlightenment scholars, or empiricist psychologists, is ultimately very helpful.

Given that it seems reasonable to incorporate psychology into a philosopher’s writings, let us quickly examine the question from the opposite perspective. Why, according to Flanagan, should a psychologist take the time to engage with moral philosophies? To answer this question one must think about how empirical psychologists tend to come about their information. Where is it that psychologists, specifically those interested in morality, get the data on which their theories and conclusions are based. The answer is that psychologists create their theories based on data collected from the subjects of their experiments and studies, subjects which are, to use a term used by Flanagan almost exclusively members of the WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democrats) demographic (3). To go more deeply into why this demographic bias exists in contemporary psychological research is to engage in a larger topic which probably warrants a separate book unto itself, suffice it to say that this bias does exist and is a large problem within the field. Having acknowledged this bias as an inherent problem of any psychological research, it becomes clear that if a psychologist wishes to get an accurate view of cross-cultural morality, then the lack of available cross-cultural psychological research would force this person to look towards some amount of moral philosophy for reference. It seems then
that Flanagan is right on two fronts: the moral philosopher would be wise to engage with psychological research, and visa-versa.

Accepting Flanagan’s mission statement as largely valid, how do we evaluate the resulting book? In order to evaluate the success of Flanagan’s book it is first necessary to figure out what kind of book this is. One’s first instinct when evaluating a book of philosophy seems to be to engage with the author’s central argument and equate the strength of these points with the quality of the book. Flanagan’s book, in contrast, is not a book built around a traditional philosophical argument in that sense. The concluding chapter of *Morals* leaves the reader with more questions than answers, but this is not as much a fault as a part of Flanagan’s methodology of which he is very open. Flanagan is not terribly interested in uncovering or concluding upon capital-T truths about human morality. *Morals* has little interest in persuading that Buddhist views of anger are more coherent than western views, or that one sprout theory is more reasonable than another. So, it seems that the kind of book *Morals* is, is a book of exploration, of raising thoughtful questions, and a model of Flanagan’s particular methodology. If *Morals* lacks as much emphasis on traditional capital-T truth arguments, it makes up with its theses of methodology. With this in mind, it seems most reasonable to evaluate Flanagan’s book through how successfully it makes a case for the author’s inclusive comparative methods. In other words, are the author’s comparisons, between western philosophies, non-western philosophies, and contemporary psychologies, good comparisons which help support Flanagan’s call of action towards interdisciplinary morality?

If we are to evaluate Flanagan’s success largely based on the success of his various comparisons, it is necessary to first establish what it is which makes a successful or “good” comparison? For the purposes of this evaluation a good comparison will be defined thusly: a situation where comparing idea A to idea B adds insight or clarification to idea A, idea B, or some greater truth/idea. Furthermore we should clarify that, while there exists some overlap and the following distinction may be a slight oversimplification, Flanagan’s book is largely made up of two distinct types of comparisons (that we will refer to here as type A and type B). Type A can be thought of as a more traditional vein of comparative philosophy, specifically a situation where one type of philosophy is compared to another. Type B comparisons involve, rather than two differing philosophies, a philosophy and a psychological theory. So, to truly evaluate the success of Flanagan’s comparisons one must look at the quality of both types of comparisons throughout the book. The goal then, of this evaluation of Flanagan is to find examples of successful type A and type B comparisons within each of the three main sections/topics of *Morals*: Sprout theories, Emotions/anger, and relationships to others and the self. If these examples can be provided, and they are plenty enough to not be thought of as the exception, then it would be reasonable to conclude that Flanagan is a success.

First, let us look at an example of a type A comparison relevant to sprout theories, and evaluate if the comparison is a success. Throughout this section of the book Flanagan surveys a variety of theories and models pertaining to sprout theories or ideas of first nature with a particular emphasis on the four sprout model provided by Mencius. Flanagan goes on to eventually compare Mencius’ sprout theory to the more western-based idea of Strawson’s reactive attitudes. Initially it seems as if this comparison is less than informative (and is, to be fair, not the only context in which Flanagan talks about Strawson), but ultimately Flanagan ends
this comparison by using Strawson to make an insightful clarification about Mencius, namely that “Mencius’s view is not one where the sprouts are mere bodily happenings, they are intentional psychophysical states” (126 *double check citation). It seems then that, while the Strawson-Mencius comparison is not the most insightful of those to be found within *Morals*, it still ultimately provides useful clarification and thusly can be used as support towards Flanagan’s success.

Let us now look at an example of a type B comparison found within the same section. Here we find a slightly more complex case as it involves multiple philosophies being examined within the context of a single psychological model. Specifically Flanagan lays out the model of development offered by Kohlberg in his 6 stage model of mental development and uses this model as a basis on which to map various relevant philosophies (Flanagan, 45). For example: Flanagan suggests that the Lockean social contract would map onto stage 4, whereas Kantean deontological thinking would map onto stage 6. In this way Flanagan is able to use a type B comparison to provide both insight and clarification of how various philosophies relate to each other.

In the second part of his book Flanagan focuses on the construct of anger and how it is defined and interpreted in various contexts. One such context Flanagan focuses on is the Buddhist idea of what could be termed a sort of anger eliminitivism. In essence, the idea here is that, through a Buddhist mindset, sensations and expressions of anger are best to be eliminated entirely from a person’s life (267). Now here is an especially interesting case because, at least in the start of his engagement with this topic, it seems that Flanagan himself has a real bias against this idea. Flanagan as a westerner had an instinctual belief in the other side of this comparison: the idea that anger can, in certain contexts, be necessary and beneficial. Ultimately Flanagan is able to grapple with the idea of anger eliminativism and, through comparing these two views on anger, is able to provide insight and clarification towards both viewpoints.

How does Flanagan’s exploration of western and Buddhist ideas of anger ultimately yield insight? Firstly, discussing Buddhist anger eliminitivism helps highlight certain particulars and assumptions made by western thoughts on anger, i.e. anger may not be a single entity, but rather a category in which multiple feelings fall into. Additionally looking at Buddhist eliminativism from a western mindset (i.e. Flanagan’s) adds insight to and clarifies the Buddhist beliefs. For an example, let’s look at the anecdote of Flanagan meeting the Dalai Lama: Flanagan asks the Dalai Lama a very western question “if you find yourself in a park bench next to a pre-war Hitler should you kill him/be angry with him?” This is a very western question, one that could not exist without the Aristotelian view of anger as it is based on the idea that the morality of anger is situation dependent. But, the question still yields insight in to the Buddhist beliefs because Dalai Lama responds, “Yes you should kill him, but you should not be angry at him as you do it”. This interaction of ideas now yields us an important insight to the Buddhist stance on anger: you should not feel anger, but this does not mean that there are not bad things in the world, negative karmic streaks which should, best to ones ability, be avoided. You should, however, not be mad at Hitler b/c he is not “a bad person in a familiar sense of bad person, where a person is a self-initiating agent, a causa sui, a demigod who is a prime mover himself unmoved. No one is one of those” (268). Ultimately, it seems clear that Flanagan’s comparison of western and Buddhist
views of anger yields a great deal of insight and clarification to both sides, and is therefore a successful comparison.

In the same section, Flanagan also makes an ultimately insightful type B comparison as well. Specifically, in trying to grapple with the idea of Buddhist anger eliminativism, Flanagan compares this Buddhist view to the psychological theory of catharsis: that feelings and expressions of anger are necessary for maintaining mental health. This comparison ends up being insightful because looking deeper into the reality of catharsis (it’s not as universal a concept in contemporary psychology as one might think) lends possible added credence to the Buddhist/stoic views (366). In trying to consolidate both ideas Flanagan also makes the insight that perhaps catharsis, while on a local/micro level promotes anger, on a more global/macro level is actually a process of eliminating anger (370). Trying to consolidate both ideas also gives us the insight that perhaps the Buddhist might acknowledge the necessity of rageful catharsis, with the caveat that the rage should only be evident through sublimation (369).

The third part of Flanagan’s book looks towards relationships between others and the self. Here we have a relevant type A comparison made between two distinct models through which to view the self: the No-self (where an individual does not have a distinct sense of self in the western sense) and the western (potentially Judeo-Christian) idea of unique individual selves or souls. This comparison ends up being successful as it satisfies the third established definition of a successful comparison: it gives us insight into a greater truth, namely It helps explain differences in behavior between western and non-western persons. i.e. differing preferences of mental states (serenity vs. pleasure), different virtue systems, and so on (409).

Flanagan goes on to make a relatively similar type B comparison when he looks at the idea of the No-self, but compares it to the psychological principle of the Fundamental Attribution Error, which can perhaps best be described as the tendency for people to overestimate the effect of a person’s traits/individuality on their behavior versus the effects of their environment and circumstance. This comparison is ultimately successful because by looking closely at research done concerning the Fundamental Attribution Error, specifically that there are geographical differences in rates of making the Fundamental Attribution Error (it is made more frequently in the west), Flanagan helps explain and add context to why the No-self is not a universally accepted concept, especially in the west (402).

In summation, it seems that Flanagan is largely successful, at least if one is to judge his success on the quality of his various cross-disciplinary comparisons of moral values. It is also important here to acknowledge that the strength of Flanagan’s comparisons, while strong evidence towards the primary aim of this book, is not purely the only way one should judge Flanagan here. In other words, while Flanagan is largely less interested in large capital-T truths than many other moral philosophers, as has been previously mentioned, this is not to say that he is not, through his arguments and comparisons, arriving at a variety of smaller, little-t truths. With that said, the main point of Flanagan’s book still seems to be his metathesis on the value of “advance[ing] an emerging conversation between philosophers and psychologists” with regards to morality and moral values (2). It is also through this aim, through proper support of this metathesis, that Flanagan truly demonstrates the undeniable success of his book: The Geography of Morals.
C. Fred Alford is an American scholar whose bibliography reflects wide-ranging interests. In separate works, he has written on the relationship between philosophy and poetry, group psychology, Greek tragedy, the Frankfurt School, and narcissism. If his book *Think No Evil: Korean values in the age of globalization* is any indication, the diversity does not seem to be one of an enthusiast, but a self-reflective practitioner of eclecticism. Interweaving social theory, empirical research, philosophical categories, and other elements from various paradigms, Alford endeavors in *Think No Evil* to unearth and present a certain section of the Korean experience. I explore below the essential components of this project and briefly draw out some issues that raise questions for the practice of comparative philosophy as well as the broader act of encountering the Other.

**The Project**

Previously, Alford had written on the existence and meaning of evil in Western societies. Now, he looks into whether Koreans, too, have this evil. He affirms his hypothesis—they do not. There seems to be a distinct disbelief of evil in South Korea. What does it mean for Koreans to lack evil? It certainly does not mean that they have a pristine society, in which malicious acts are not committed. If an American were to examine the daily interactions and political affairs in Korea, they would surely find certain relationships, actions, or characteristics worthy of being deemed evil. Yet, neither does it mean that Koreans merely lack the word or concept of evil. Evil does not show up for them at all—evil is not experienced.

In order to make this point, Alford narrows evil to its Western sense, pointing out that although words such as *Ak* and *saak* roughly translates to “evil,” they do not correspond to evil as we Westerners know and fear it. In lieu of a precise definition, Alford provides a cluster of meanings. They include remorseless malice, opposition to good, wrongful attractiveness, suffering, challenge to God, and dread (24-25). While interesting as a mirror through which to examine my own culturally-transmitted, latent impressions of evil, I found these descriptors rather irrelevant in reading the rest of the book. As Alford uses it throughout, it means absolute condemnability. Evil as something Koreans lack is absolutely condemnable malice.

To call something evil in this sense, one needs to perceive the world in a dualistic way: Good and bad, excusable and condemnable, heaven and hell. In order to assign such dualistic,
extreme labels to something, a person needs to have some kind of distance from it. Although Alford does not elaborate on this point, perhaps the reason is that such judgments can only arise from abstracting things from their other qualities, situatedness, temporal indeterminacy, etc—discerning them hazily from afar. It is precisely this abstraction that Koreans do not perform. Because a Korean individual is so enmeshed in a web of relationships, a matrix of bonds woven so tightly that they cannot abstract themselves or other elements—people, relationships, actions, comportments, situations, qualities—from it, evil cannot appear.

In this way, Alford argues that the absence of evil in Korea is a social, not a linguistic, phenomenon. It is not the absence of the right word or concept, but the social organization that founds the non-existence of evil in Korea. This emphasis on concrete sociopolitical reality does not discourage Think No Evil from being a fascinating treatment of abstract principles and concepts such as the Self, non-duality, and Enlightenment.

More than why, Alford is interested in how the Koreans do not believe in evil (x). How did they construct the world so that evil not only does not but cannot exist? This question, of course, is founded on the assumption that there is some kind of rhythm and rhyme behind the ontological status of abstract entities, some kind of consistent, coherent projection of reality. Such a unifying and mediating layer is culture. Culture “is the rules by which some things are brought into existence by disallowing the existence of other things. Cultures makes a world by processes of inclusion and exclusion at the level of being—that is, of existence” (10). So the non-existence of evil in Korea is the effect of culture, a “metaphysical incredulity” that is not so much an antinormal, amendable absence as it is a non-concept integral to the structure of a society (10). By looking around this evil-shaped hole, we can see the different parts motivating and sustaining it. The said parts are nothing other than the rules and processes that constitute culture. Hence, Alford calls his project “cultural mapping,” in which he tries to lay out the topography of a society’s imagination by the way of one telling non-entity (10).

Such metaphors seem to assume the existence of a culture that is coherent and without contradictory elements, like a faultless architecture, for which one structuring element exists collaboratively with and speaks to all the other components. Alford does not take up this strong thesis, however, and operates instead on a picture more akin to a vegetable soup—definite formations exist within it, but their logics are pluralistic and discontinuous. The absence of evil, then, is not the key to the Rosetta stone, but a visible portion of one strand, one formation that embodies one logic of the many that go into forming the boundaries and spaces that make up culture.

In this way, the non-concept of evil is a “prism with which to view” one aspect of the Korean experience, and a pretty important one at that (12). Namely, it discloses the interrelationship among the structure of the Korean self, meaning of globalization, and the possibility of Enlightenment.

To absolutely condemn someone as evil, we need to have a distance from them, abstract them from conditions, qualities, and motivations that may help us understand, sympathize, or empathize with them in a way that humanizes them. Koreans cannot have a concept of evil, because their identity—as a people and as individuals—is enmeshed in the unbroken web of
relationships of understanding, sympathy, and empathy. The Korean self is, both descriptively and normatively, a we-self, in which an individual’s creative locus of emotions, thoughts, actions, and values is situated in the tension between the individual and the particular others that they have relationships with. One cannot at once abstract from these identity-constituting particular others enough to condemn them and have a self, which is a we-self. Koreans, therefore, preclude evil to preserve the self and all the various comportments that the self allows, such as making choices and having preferences.

But in another sense, evil is alive and well in South Korea, silently lurking in the back of everyone’s mind. To make this point, Alford uses evil not as absolutely condemnable malice but as an unuttered phenomenon that Koreans find absolutely condemnable. It is the “loss of root and bond,” “absolute alienation”—the very state that Koreans fear would come about if they call anyone evil as in unforgivably malicious (25). Taking his cue from Paul Ricoeur, Alford exposit this kind of evil as “absolute otherness, an otherness that does not recognize the self as human,” such as the one manifest in the horrendous fate that befalls the protagonist of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (25). This total unconnectedness and loneliness is how “Koreans would define evil if they could. It is how they in effect define evil by organizing so much of their cultural life in the service of its denial” (11).

It is in this sense that globalization is evil, argues Alford. The Western value of individualism seems to advocate a selfishness that undermines a Korean’s connectedness to the collective well-being. The dawn of capitalism may be the steamroller that flattens all the various, particular relationships that the self exists between into one of profit-driven, rationality that, in projecting the others as instruments, cannot create the tension between the self and others that underlies the we-self. Exacerbating this homogenization is the West’s love of universal principles, reflected in the ideals of Kohlberg, Donagan, Gewirth, Rawls, Kant, and Enlightenment thinkers generally (22). In addition, the deluge of possibilities that accompany modernization threatens the integrity of communal bonds, as individuals take advantage of mobility to elect out of troublesome social arrangements. If all such conditions are indeed realized, the Koreans will plunge into a terrifying void, as they find not only others, but their very selves—in that they are constituted by others—becoming alien and unreachable.

Against this possibility, Alford recommends that Koreans take globalization head-on, experimenting with new ways of thinking and acting that truly synthesize the old and the new. In this way, globalization acts not as the unstoppable, external force that robs the Koreans of their self, but becomes an act of self-expression and self-creation. In this way, globalization can also be thought of as Enlightenment.

Alford approaches Enlightenment as Foucault conceptualizes it. It is learning about new possibilities of good and meaningful life from encountering others, and transforming oneself through the lessons learned. Korea circa 1990, in not yet having fully digested the modernizing influences into stable forms, had many jagged edges, junctures between the old and the new at which the self could “rebuild and reform” (24).

Although it is appears explicitly only as a recommendation for Koreans, the concept of Enlightenment seems applicable to multiple aspects of Alford’s project. For one, Alford brings
out certain aspects of Korean culture to make suggestions for his own society—the West. Could this book be called an instantiation of Enlightenment as the West experiences it in its encounter with the East?

**Critique of Methodology**

More immediately answerable is the question regarding the nature of the encounter itself. As “an anthropological approach to philosophy,” the methodology of the book is eclectic and eccentric relative to other, more typical works of philosophy. From casual dinners to formal written essays commissioned to university lecture halls, interviews with politicians, sociologists, philosophers, the homeless, old men hanging out at parks, and many people from various other walks of life, Alford grounds his points on the empirical work of “listening” to Koreans and the Korea they embody (8). A little more peripheral to his method of discovery but still just as important to his style of presentation and justification are observations drawn from sociological research, psychological studies, folktales, and contemporary literature.

How is this philosophy, you might ask? There are a couple hints. For one, he engages with the very meaning of abstract ontic categories like the self, language, culture, and social organization. Furthermore, he builds his ideas vis-à-vis and through the arguments of a wide range of philosophers, from Confucius to Hegel, imparting the impression that his words, in having other philosophies as their interlocutors, also amount to philosophy.

What ultimately makes it a legitimate, and even inspiringly innovative, piece of philosophy is its framing of the primary subject matter—the Korean experience is Korean philosophy. In exploring a corner of the Korean experience, then, he explores Korean philosophy. The resulting work, then, can only be a work of philosophy, as an exposition and critique of a philosophy. That experience contains philosophy is, at core, a Hegelian thesis (1-29). That the conceptual system of a society can be discerned by looking at what its people do and say is intuitively appealing—we like to believe that there is some sort of logic behind our lives. The empirical study conducted on this basis is coherent and fascinating in its general shape. Alford connects his empirical observation of evil’s absence to his observation of Koreans’ deep consideration of other people to reconstruct the Korean philosophy as one whose dialogical conception of self precludes the existence of evil. This component of the conceptual matrix in turn explains the practical realities that embody it: Koreans do not say “evil” in the Western sense because of their relational self, and they care about the interests and values of others because they are integral to a functioning self.

Weaving in and out of formal, research-based as well as casual, everyday findings of observable phenomena, Alford’s project lends itself to being called experimental philosophy. It is interesting to see that comparative philosophy can push the boundaries of what philosophy can be, not only by engaging constructively with subaltern knowledge, such as that of Africa and Native America, but by taking on unconventional form and approach itself.

Yet, there in equal measures with the promise of the work are its risks. Alford seeks not only to examine Korean norms, concepts, words, or social structure. He also wants to look at what their norms actually turn out to be, what concepts Koreans don’t think they have but
actually do, non-words that are louder than words, and a social fate that is yet hidden from its people. That is, he wants to look at the Korean experience, transcending the everyday Korean’s perspective to know of this perspective more penetratingly than the Koreans themselves. How could this be possible? Even if totally feasible, what is the ethical implications of treating living, breathing Korean agents as objects of dissection, whose self-descriptions and self-understanding are not taken at face-value but psychoanalyzed for unconscious fears and motivations?

Accordingly, Alford is attentive to qualifying his methodology and demonstrating self-awareness about the claims that follow. He is very much mindful of the strangeness, even brashness, of studying another culture’s silence (x). He cites Said multiple times to frame his own and other academics’ tendencies to see the Western self, or their fantasy, lived out in the exotic other. Especially intense are his preemptive self-reflection on his generalizations. After he states his thesis for the first time—“There is, I believe, something it makes sense to call a Korean view of evil”—he immediately says, “When a writer says things like this, the reader often sees red flags, as well he or she should” (6-7).

This kind of consciousness does much to bolster the readers’ trust in the author’s study and assertions. Yet, as it applies to Alford, one must wonder if such disclaimers factor at all into his methodology or his conclusions. For instance, one of the most profound points he makes, I felt, was his case for particularity, made through his view on globalization. When we discuss globalization, we often say things like, “Everybody’s different,” and “It’s a world full of diversities!” The sinister fact is that such expressions and the underlying attitude are actually homogenizing forces. We assume and insist on the existence of one place—“a world”—when there are multiple worlds. In saying “diversity” and leaving it at that, we gloss over all the myriad differences, shoving them into one uniform category instead of taking time to carefully look at them in their particularity. With this point, Alford adds profundity to his choice to study only Korea, as opposed to the entire East, even while a lot of what he says, he thinks, can be applied to all of the East—he wants to respect each place’s distinctness and not fall into the trap of homogenization (15).

The catch is that the reach of this commitment seems to end there. While denying any ambition to essentialize—to set in stone an unchanging ‘Korean essence’—he insists on the total inclusiveness of his sweeping generalizations in respect to the current Korea. All Koreans do not experience evil. All Koreans have modal we-selves. All Koreans face the threat of being shattered by globalization. If he admits real diversity and contradictions not only across but within cultures, how could he feel comfortable making such generalizations? For one, they have potentially problematic consequences.

One issue is the polarizations that inevitably accompany the generalizations. The description of all Koreans as X becomes possible only in describing X in terms of not-X, the opposite which is assigned to the West. For instance, while debunking the collectivist-individualist dualism in stating that all selves are a sustained co-existence of the two tendencies, Alford creates another dichotomy—the Korean self, which is deeply self-consciously entwined in relationships, and the Western self, which perceives itself as more abstracted from relationships. Another is the tension he sets up between capitalism and Confucianism as ways that the West and Korea, respectively, organize their societies. Capitalism’s emergence in Korea,
then, is seen as a development contradictory and destructive to their native system. In light of the heterogeneity of culture, such polarizations seem unmerited and unjustifiable, especially when insisted on as exceptionless realities. Ironically enough then, this seems to be another place that Enlightenment, as Alford adopts it from Foucault, seems applicable. Alford emphasizes the role of regret in Enlightenment—wisdom always outstrips its application, making the learners feel as if there could always have been more done. Could it be that Alford, who demonstrates considerable attunement to irreducible particularities at all levels and to the danger of dualistic abstractions, does not—regrettably—do justice to this realization in his methodological and discursive practices?

He would, I imagine, argue that his conclusions were drawn not in defiance, but in full accordance, with his insistence on particularity. It was in abiding by ungeneralizability that he delved into a careful empirical study of Korea. And now, the study allows him to make truly informed, true conclusions about a culture in all its particularity. For instance, he did not start out saying that all Koreans disbelieve evil—it was in conducting 250 interviews and finding unanimity of their disbelief that he could feel confident arguing for its present absolute absence from the Korean imaginary (8). If he turns out wrong, he believes that it would be due to “empirical failure on my [his] part: a failure to interview enough different Koreans, a failure to listen attentively, or whatever.”(8)

On my part—herein lies the manifestation of Alford’s complete faith in empiricism as such: any fault in conclusions lies in the human error, not the methodology itself. In its ideal form—when done thoroughly enough, without a biased sample, etc.—empiricism can disclose truth. My impression, however, is that this is far from self-evident. No matter how many pieces of supporting evidence one collects, a hypothesis cannot be proven. Receiving positive answers from 99% of Koreans does not confirm a generalization made of all Koreans. Even more pressing is that what counts as evidence, the standards of justification, and norms of methodology may limit or distort what we find out through the study. Especially for an anthropological research like the one of Alford, which involves qualitative, as opposed to mainly quantitative, arrangement and analysis of evidence, ‘support’ is especially susceptible to misleading influences such as selection and confirmation bias. In light of this, even if we “listen hard enough,” would we ever know? (8)

Such are questions that deprioritize empiricism, even in its perfection. So much more so, then, when its practitioner is a limited human being, as Alford admits that he is. The most glaring danger, I felt, was his status as an “outsider, not just to Korea but to Korean studies” (7). While his self-qualification extends only to his limitations of time and human resources, I was more concerned about his lack of linguistic and cultural fluency, juxtaposed to which the boldness of his project started seeming almost rash. Certainly, there is nothing that disallows people of one culture from studying people of another, but I believe that the appropriateness of the endeavor lies in the degree of preparation and caution the guest takes in their encounter with the host. It was this respectful readiness that seemed missing in Alford’s project. For instance, how did he expect to extract Koreans’ opinions on topics as complex as evil and globalization in conducting most interviews in English? Conversely, how could one expect to understand a culture without a certain familiarity with the language? Alford constantly misuses the word chong, applying it as a virtue and a social norm that guides people’s conscious choices, whereas it is actually more akin
to primarily visceral, non-conceptualized emotional attachment (71). There was a passage in which he clearly misunderstands a Taxi driver, whom he takes to be asking, “Do you have any sons?” when the question was most certainly “Do you have any children?” the slang for ‘children’ being ‘sons’ (75). Alford then builds an entire argument based on this exchange, pointing out the gender hierarchy of Korea. Coupled with the sweeping generalizations and a tone that cannot be described as anything other than cheeky (e.g. of the Korean president: “When people talk like this, it is apparent they have not a clue”; of globalization’s meaning: “No wonder Koreans are frightened!”), the author’s ‘human limitation’ is at times distressing (154).

Yet, it is this certain wildness that made this book overall such a pleasure to read. It is in his lack of lengthy justifications that Alford can deliver so many appetizingly bite-sized insights into Korea, the West, and human beings generally. The confidence with which he serves them means less heavy-handed metadiscourse and qualifications, making the book a fast-paced page-turner. This does not mean, however, that levity and entertainment are incompatible with a demonstration of academic integrity and serious methodological consideration. It is my own hypothesis that not all Koreans disbelieve in evil, and that not all of the West believe in evil. If Alford followed through with his emphasis on true particularity, he would not have discarded this assumption of heterogeneity, no matter how much empirical support he found towards homogeneity. The parallel could be said of his other generalizations, such as ones about self, globalization, relationships, and intellectual orientation. If Alford not only mentioned, but also took as his methodological basis, diversity at the level of subsections of society and individuals, perhaps there would have been less excitingly bold claims to make, but the project would have gained potential for added complexity. For instance, perhaps Alford could have gone on to examine the factors and mechanisms that made some people say that evil exists in disharmony and others who said that it lay in actions, instead of grouping them under the heading of people who, ultimately, did not speak of the Western sense of evil (111).

As Comparative Philosophy

The factor that would have done a bigger disservice to the value and reliability of Alford’s conclusions than generalizations or language barriers would have been a stubborn commitment to familiar interpretations and evaluations of the Other’s social reality. Impressively, Alford does not fall into this trap. He admits that he is performing a “Western overlay,” asking whether Koreans have a fundamentally Western concept (7). Yet, in finding it absent, Alford does not abide by his home territory’s norms to dismiss the absence as an underdevelopment in the Korean’s conceptual organization. He shifts his perspective to see the absence through their eyes, working to see how it is not accidental but normal, integral to their existence. In another move away from one-sided objectification, Alford takes up and presents ways that the West can learn from the Korean philosophy. He points out, through the exploration of Koreans’ appreciation and acceptance of the dialogical character of their selves, that the West is relatively blind to the deep interpersonality of our personality. In actuality, we cannot abstract ourselves from our relationships, but some cultures encourage individuals to conceive of themselves this way. Alford points out through his exposition of the Korean conception of self that the abstraction may ironically undercut the Western person’s project of self-mastery and autonomy, because we deny and therefore fail to address the impact of others on our attitudes and actions. Implicit is the recommendation for an awareness of such interconnectedness, to
learn it from the Korean model of the self.

The audience of his normative imports is not limited to those of the West. For instance, he challenges people everywhere to rethink the individualist-collectivist dualism, exposing its misguidedness in light of the fact that Koreans strongly value both individual freedom and communal commitments. The self is a conflict, a constant, situation-specific renegotiation and interaction among relationships, including the one to oneself. He challenges sociologists, psychologists, and others who subscribe to the dichotomous paradigm to turn to a more complex, dynamic conception of the self.

Indeed, it could be that Alford’s work is an instance of global philosophy, as Tim Connolly in Doing Philosophy Comparatively discusses it. “While remaining within our own philosophical tradition, we look to thinkers and texts from other traditions in order to expand the philosophical resources at our disposal and submit our own ideas to external criticism.” While revolving around the Western concept of evil, Alford manages to evaluate and challenge the Western notion of the abstract Self by examining the embodied Korean philosophy of the dialogical self. In respect to the individualist-collectivist dualism, Alford puts thinkers from different cultural traditions—Confucius and Aristotle, Tocqueville and Mencius in conversation to contribute constructively to a problematic. In sum, Alford draws from global sources to do philosophy relevant to the global community.

While this kind of work is inspiring in its prefiguration of the wide, inclusive, creative dialogue that may emerge as globalization reconfigures academia, true cosmopolitanism faces hurdles that Alford does not quite address, but in an indirect way, makes clear for us to see. When Alford makes recommendations to Koreans, urging them to get over their paralyzing fear, fight off the “collective solipsism,” and face globalization head-on to create a “new Korea,” my visceral reaction was great discomfort, despite finding his normative claims interesting, agreeable, and well-founded (12). Alford is not a part of Korean society, but instead from one that is other, and perhaps importantly, of greater geopolitical power, one whose government can be accused of having something of a neocolonial presence in Korea. In light of the undeniable separation between cultures and the messy power dynamics among them, what is the ethical implication of making a normative proposal exclusively for members of another culture? It would have greatly enriched Alford’s discussion if he addressed this question and situated himself within this problematic. Of course, one cannot expect one thinker to consider everything. As it is presented, Alford project simply brings to our awareness a new issue to reckon with on the horizon of comparative philosophy.

There are other themes running through Alford’s work that can serve as points of departure for self-reflective discussions among those working to understand and learn from historical and contemporary thinkers of other cultures. First is the relationship between language and thought. Does language indicate thought? For instance, can the fact that Koreans say “we” instead of “I” be taken as evidence for the individual’s strong identification with their community? While answering negatively to the second question, Alford opens but does not close the first. The presence or absence of certain words do not indicate the presence or absence of a

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89 Connolly collages different thoughts on global philosophy in a chapter on a promising way to do comparative philosophy. See Connolly 2015, 193.
certain knowledge, conceptual tendency, meaning, or experience (55). “Linguistic forms,” he says, “can become empty over time, eventually being repopulated with new meanings” that does not obviously correspond to the ones that an outsider may want to infer from them (36). Yet, “although terms are not important, the patterns of terms we call conversation is crucial” (36). As a comparative philosopher, these claims may be worth taking up and fleshing out to defend or critique in order to engage in some metaphilosophy on methodology. We look to written sources to understand what a philosopher from another culture is saying. Should we delve into the etymology of their central concepts? Or focus instead on figuring them out in context of their repetition by approaching the text in a more holistic way?

Another provocatively raised point in Alford’s work is the relationship between thought and culture. While extensively using Confucius and other canonical Eastern thinkers to expound the Korean experience, and while taking up Freud and other Western philosophers to talk about the West, Alford denies a straight-forwarded connection between intellectual history and cultural reality. For instance, it may be tempting to trace back Koreans’ denial of evil to their “Confucian, Buddhist, and shamanistic” roots, but that would contradict the fact that Christianity—which has a strong Western idea of evil—too has a strong hold on some Koreans’ conceptual articulation of the world (90). Culture, in turn, cannot be projected in any straight-forward way by looking at its prevailing belief systems. If intellectual tradition cannot speak to the broader culture, is the inverse also true? If so, is it possible to contextualize the foreign philosophies in a way that discloses, and not distorts, their meanings?

In Sum

These and other questions linger, as Alford’s work comes to a close. They are, however, more like glittering jewels to be picked up and refined, than frustrating gaps upon which to dismiss his conclusions. They are opportunities for us to initiate discussions, the importance of which is accentuated by the immediately relevant and fascinating nature of the project that evokes the topics: Comparative philosophy as a method to understand, learn from, and even make suggestions towards not only the philosophy, but the way of life of, other cultures. If we want to realize this potential, we must examine the problematics internal to it. Seeing as how he puts insights before conventions and delivers what he finds with delicious brevity, Alford would be a valuable, welcomed contributor to this conversation.
The Windmills of Your Mind: The Circular Nature of *Being and Ambiguity* as Expressing a Neo-Tiantai Perspective


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*Being and Ambiguity* covers a lot of ground. The book is divided into three sections each of which could potentially be approached individually, although they benefit greatly as parts of a larger whole. Part one focuses on elucidating the key concepts of Neo-Tiantai thought. Part two focuses on an application of Neo-Tiantai thought to ethical considerations. Part three applies Neo-Tiantai thought to such all-important human concerns such as eroticism, beauty, and humor. This review will focus entirely on parts one and three, with special attention paid to the way in which *Being and Ambiguity*’s method of explication embodies Neo-Tiantai thought. While largely consistent within each section, throughout the book Ziporyn engages the central topic on very different levels from many different directions. This seems to be an essential characteristic of Ziporyn’s style in *Being and Ambiguity*, a characteristic which benefits his project greatly and which I will attempt to reveal through this review.

**As a Work of Comparative Philosophy**

As Ziporyn humorously acknowledges in his introduction, the school of Neo-Tiantai thought is singularly composed of his own thoughts and theories. For this reason, it may seem silly to conceive of *Being and Ambiguity* as a work of comparative philosophy between Neo-Tiantai thought and anything. Comparing your ideas to other ideas should be considered engagement with said ideas rather than comparison, as any philosophical project undertaken presupposes some thought on the part of the author. Ziporyn does in fact engage in meaningful comparison between Neo-Tiantai thought and more widespread modes of thought, but by virtue of the development of Neo-Tiantai thought as wholly dependent upon the one doing the comparison, it seems that any synthesis drawn from a comparison would inherently be reflected in an instantaneously “updated” Neo-Tiantaism which then undermines the comparative nature of the project undertaken. It seems more accurate to consider the book to be an application of Neo-Tiantai thought, with plenty of interaction with existing philosophical modalities.

Neo-Tiantai thought is rooted in the Tiantai school of Buddhism. However, for similar reasons as discussed above, it does not make sense to view Ziporyn’s Neo-Tiantai thought to be understood as in a comparative relationship to Tiantai teachings. This is particularly true in the context of this book, as Ziporyn makes no explicit claims as to the relationship between the two. We should consider Neo-Tiantaism to be the extrapolation of certain key principles drawn from Tiantai, while in no way limiting itself based on Tiantai teachings.
Through understanding Neo-Tiantai thought in this way, I don’t believe *Being and Ambiguity* should be approached as a direct work of comparative philosophy. However, we are certainly able to envisage the project as a sort of second-order comparison by proxy between key Tiantai principles and all the philosophical conceptions which *Being and Ambiguity* engages with. It is important that we acknowledge this aspect of the book, but it should not be seen as the primary characteristic. Ultimately Ziporyn is engaged in building and communicating a conception, before going on to defend and finally apply that conception. The comparative nature of the book exists in the expression of these Tiantai rooted concepts in a more typically western mode of discourse. So we should acknowledge the comparative nature of the book, while keeping in mind that in this case comparison is used as a means to an end and is not a goal in and of itself.

**What is Tiantai?**

Tiantai Buddhism exists as an extension of more traditional Buddhist understandings of reality and the nature of being. Tiantai takes the Lotus Sutra, which is an influential text in the Mahayana school of Buddhism, as the primary source for establishing understanding. In *Being and Ambiguity*, Ziporyn’s representation of the Lotus Sutra focuses on the understanding of the śrāvakas, or lay practitioners, and their relationship to buddhahood. The background assumption here is that the śrāvaka must change and better themselves in order to become bodhisattvas, just as the bodhisattva seeks to change and better themselves in pursuit of the embodiment of Buddha-nature. What results is the conception of a hierarchical progression, where the traveler seeks to become increasingly aligned with Buddha-nature. The novel understanding promoted in the Lotus Sutra is the idea that the śrāvaka are already bodhisattvas, and on the path to Buddha-nature, precisely because they deny bodhisattvahood (15). This understanding is achieved through understanding the future path of the traveler as existing and being embodied by the traveler, existing not even just independently of the individual's ability to understand their being as such but rather because they are unable to understand their being as such. The key point here is the “disjunction between ‘what you are really accomplishing’ and ‘the goal you have in mind in order to make that accomplishment possible’” (15). This is why the śrāvaka who denies their bodhisattvahood is already possessed fully of Buddha-nature. Their denial is the truth they see, the “goal they have in mind,” while what they are “really accomplishing” is following the path towards Buddha-nature. Within the Lotus Sutra, the point at which the being of the śrāvaka is revealed to additionally have been Buddha-nature expressing itself as not Buddha-nature is referred to as “the opening of the lotus,” and is the transformative “step” which allows for the simultaneous existence of being and denial.

This relation between denial of Buddha-nature being in fact precisely Buddha-nature is the core understanding of Tiantai which Ziporyn seeks to elucidate and apply. There are two key concepts which he draws out of this relationship. X is -X, and “the opening of the lotus” or the understanding of perceived goals to embody previously unknown actualities through revelation of their contributory nature. The first of these is primarily a metaphysical investigation which focuses on our understanding of things as possessing specific qualities, and the ways in which we are able to assign meaning in relation to some referent. The second is considered primarily as a revelatory action, or re-definition of being as a result of changing referents, which does not in fact change the true nature of the subject but simply explicates its already existing nature in a
new way. These concepts are remarkably complex, in part because they are meant to be understood as true in their most straightforward sense.

Tiantai understanding is based on the Three Truths: Emptiness, Provisional Positing, and Centrality. These truths come as a direct response to an existing conception within Buddhism of Two Truths which is basically “truth and Truth.” The Tiantai understanding claims that “truth and Truth” are in fact equally universal, and this relationship is expressed as the third Truth. An important aspect of the tripartite nature of the Three Truths is the understanding that they are ultimately interchangeable in respect to the relationships between them. This is introduced as the idea of a non-exclusive center. Whichever Truth you initially accept, one of the others is in effect the contradiction of your assumption, and the remaining Truth is that which displays the simultaneous existence of the contradictory two. Ultimately what this means is that each expression of the Three Truths is fundamentally identical, and the perceived variation is simply superficial expression of your chosen frame of reference. This precludes us from simply viewing Neo-Tiantai thought as a form of holism. This non-exclusive center is vital to the understanding of the Three Truths that Ziporyn seeks to convey. The tripartite relation of the Three Truths expresses the possibility of simultaneous complementary existence and non-existence, and the active relationships between these three truths is represented by the revelatory nature of “the opening of the lotus.” Ziporyn refers to the Three Truths as “Global Incoherence, Local Coherence, and Reversible Asness, respectively” (16), which are the terms I will use from this point on with “Intersubsumption” and “Centrality” being used interchangeably with “Reversible Asness.”

Three Truths

Local Coherence is that which is able to be coherently understood within a particular frame of reference. This appears to me to be basically what we traditionally conceive of as general knowledge regarding things which we encounter. Local Coherence is what allows us to consistently perceive qualities of things. We are able to have knowledge of things as long as some particular frame of reference pertains within which these qualities are distinguishable.

A background assumption here is an acceptance of the Buddhist conception of emptiness as relating to the nature of things and their qualities possessed. The extension of this emptiness is that there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship between things and expressions of these things, and therefore qualities do not manifest in subjects simpliciter. Global Incoherence is the conception of emptiness, in that since X cannot appear simpliciter, X is always dependent upon our frame of reference to be expressed. Precisely because of this dependency, it is impossible for X to appear consistently in every possible frame of reference.

Reversible Asness is the recognition that Local Coherence and Global Incoherence are identical. This conclusion is reached by determining that each implies and is implied by the other, and as such asserting one is simultaneously asserting the other. Each assertion is therefore identical. Centrality (Reversible Asness) is exactly the mutual identity that is Local Incoherence expressed as Global Incoherence, and vice versa. Centrality is this identity equivalence, and as such does not exist independently of it. It is vital to the Tiantai understanding that Centrality is not conceived of as existing independently of this mutual identity, but rather as simply another
expression of it. What this means is that Centrality does not have primacy over either of the other Truths, and that in asserting any one Truth, the others are necessarily asserted in the same breath. This is the way in which the Three Truths are mutually interchangeable.

**The Lotus**

I don’t think I’m simply showcasing my ignorance when I say that the commutable nature of the tripartite arrangement of the Three Truths is hard to fully grasp. A comprehensive understanding is difficult to attain primarily because of the unique nature of the way Neo-Tiantai thought considers the most fundamental modes of understanding reality. What Ziporyn is arguing for is not new conclusions, but rather new ways of approaching our basic assumptions about what it means for a thing to be distinguished as a particular thing. He later becomes more focused on conclusions, but for now I will focus on his methodology for accurately conveying the understanding of the non-exclusive center which undergirds his entire conceptual system.

Ziporyn spends a considerable chunk of the book fully exploring what it means for us to accept reality as being possessed of a non-exclusive center. This is particularly notable because the whole of this understanding is quickly expressed in the first fraction of these pages. Ziporyn spends a considerable amount of time repeatedly illustrating the same basic principles of the non-exclusive center through various arguments. I see two reasons for this. The mundane reason is that the ideas are difficult enough to understand that they bear repeated engagement. More interestingly I think his explanatory method aligns well with the internal relational structures of the non-exclusive center.

While the non-exclusive center necessitates the interchangeability of the Three Truths, the most straightforward way of understanding the tripartite relationship is the following way: Local Coherence as assertion, Global Incoherence as contradiction, Intersubsumption as synthesis. This approach seems to have some similarities to the dialectical method. The non-exclusive center means that this process can start with any Truth as the assertion, but it seems to me that what persists throughout these permutations is the flow of the relationships between Truths as they are simultaneously created and transformed by the initial assertion. What results is that Ziporyn repeatedly takes us through the reasoning, from a variety of starting positions. Within each example we are shown how the non-exclusive center is reached from each specific starting position. In this way we are given more examples of how the non-exclusive center is supported, but more subtly we are shown the patterns which allow us to bind these disparate Truths into what is ultimately the cohesive whole of the non-exclusive center.

I’d like to introduce a metaphor in the form of a lotus flower. We have a center part surrounded by a bunch of petals. It seems to me that each of Ziporyn’s examples begins where a petal meets the center. Where it begins along the center is distinct, but ultimately unimportant to the structure of the individual petal. As we trace the top of the petal away from the center we are exploring our assertion (perhaps Local Coherence) and as we round the tip and head back along the bottom we are exploring our contradiction (in this case Global Incoherence.) Our synthesis (in this case Intersubsumption) comes in realizing that the top and bottom of the petal are in fact the same thing seen from two perspectives. We have come back to (the non-exclusive center) the center of the flower. This is perplexing, because we have now obtained a vision of a final answer...
in the non-exclusive center as the combination of the center and the petals. While quite flexible, the underlying nature of such an understanding seems to be that of existing simpliciter. At this point, we must experience “the opening of the lotus” in realizing that the flower is not in fact this arrangement of center and petals, but rather the collective being of the center in relation to the petals, and further each side of each petal to every side of every other petal. As distinct pieces within this collective whole, each side of each petal is in relation to and thus possessed of the entirety of the flower. Further, it is not the collection as a whole which makes up the flower, but rather it has always been the case that the entire flower is contained in each expression of each part of the flower.

So now we have a lotus flower. Up until this point, I believe my portrayal to be true to Ziporyn’s intended meaning. I will call this understanding “reliable interpretation,” and what follows I will call “extended interpretation.” What we are left with is a coherent understanding of the flower as a whole as expressed above. This seems to imply that we have in fact determined that which encompasses the Three Truths and their interdependence. This is what I would consider to be a fair representation of what Being and Ambiguity is about. However, in reading this book we have been indoctrinated into a certain sense of relating to coherences. At this point it seems fair to say that this meta-coherence, by virtue of any positive existence it has, is equally possessed of its own negative existence. This negative existence is such that it directly contradicts the claims I have been making as to the relational properties of this system of coherences. This contradiction serves to unravel each claim made all the way down the chain, until eventually we are left with nothing. In effect, the acceptance of Ziporyn’s system is such that it totally invalidates the system precisely by its own acceptance. In this way we are left in an absolutely ambiguous state, which nonetheless contains the generative aspects, and thus already is the full expression, of the system we have just proven untrue. This continual simultaneous creation and destruction of meaning as precisely the same thing is also what Being and Ambiguity is about. It is also no different than the at this point trivial example of \( X = -X \). Once again, “the opening of the lotus” reveals that the entire system is self-referential, has always been so, and could be no other way. This is why Ziporyn repeats the same scenario over and over with different players, creating a system which destroys itself as quickly as it is conveyed.

What I’m claiming here is that our engagement with Being and Ambiguity should not be limited to the reliable interpretation, but should also include the extended interpretation. While I don’t think Ziporyn necessarily intends for us to make this extended interpretation, I believe it in no way disagrees with what he has written. In the later sections of the book where Ziporyn applies the understanding described in the earlier sections, we should in fact limit ourselves to the reliable interpretation, as that is what he is using to illuminate the subjects he engages with. In pursuing these exploratory applications he is applying the reliable interpretation, but in our engagement with the results of these explorations as readers I believe we should bear in mind the extended interpretation. Ziporyn addresses this issue in his preface:

I too am a child of my time, and the fact is that this ‘traditional’ kind of argument is more convincing, clearer, more easily deployable and applicable in new contexts, than mere dogmatic assertions and finely-wrought epigrammatic insights. Systematic exegesis has the advantage of spelling out a pattern of connections, which the reader can internalize by tracing its contours in operation after operation, thereby actually learning a new skill, the
skill of applying the same operations on new material. This, rather than the use of an arsenal of arguments mean to compel submission, is the intended effect of the almost anachronistic or atavistic creation of what looks like a ‘system’ in this book, in spite of the fact that this particular system is centered on an attempted demonstration of the felicitous impossibility of any complete or unilaterally coherent system. (xix-xx)

I believe this is exactly the point I am trying to make. The extended interpretation as offered is certainly not the goal of the text, for how could it be when its being is its own denial? Rather, the goal of the text is the expression of the reliable interpretation offered in the terms of our time as a “traditional” argument. Through this argument, we are made aware of a specter of fundamental ambiguity in our process which must exist as a result of the argument we are making. This sort of shadowy conception of meta-argument concerning knowledge versus ambiguity is created only through our engagement with the “traditional” argument as a process. In focusing on this epistemological ambiguity, we see it not as the result of any argument, as some object or understanding, but rather the relational processes which tie together the argument within which we begin to see it. This is important because it highlights the way in which it is not an understanding which can be directly expressed, but rather the continuous flux and simultaneous contradiction within the system. Of course, the more I attempt to pin it down in some form of traditionally relatable language, the less sense it makes in relation to any particular object, and I end up repeating the same basic idea with a new facade.

Engagement with Bataille

Part Three of Being and Ambiguity reads very differently from the rest of the book. In this section the methodical argumentative style used in building a system of understanding from fundamental methodological bases is dropped in favor of a more meandering engagement with a wide variety of topics. The tone is much less formal, and the conclusions drawn are not obligated to display the same level of clearly delineated methodological rigor. At this point we are expected to have solidified our understanding of Neo-Tiantai ways of understanding our world, and are simply using these tools in order to gain a more complete understanding of the world we inhabit. Noticeably absent is the need for the consideration of the meta-level self-nullification of our understandings due to the more limited scope of our application of principles to more concrete situations.

A good example of this section is Ziporyn’s engagement with Bataille’s assertions regarding eroticism. In summary, Bataille claims that life is inherently discontinuous, and the essence of eroticism lies in the ways in which eroticism transcends the discontinuous nature of life. The application of this is such that erotic action is considered a “violent” action in that it entails the destruction of the discontinuous nature of a participant. This violence is the fundamental nature of eroticism, and beauty thus exists purely to the extent that it can be destroyed in order to highlight the contrast between the discontinuous and continuous nature of the participant.

Bataille’s analysis is undeniably provocative. I take issue with fundamental assumptions made by Bataille, as well as the credibility of much of his conclusions. That being said, his analysis is an interesting take on eroticism which merits engagement, and his methodology in
particular is a valuable perspective. Ziporyn engages with this material largely from a methodological perspective, and comments on the conclusions drawn largely in terms of how they are affected by an engagement with their creation process rather than the fundamental assumptions they are based upon. This seems like an optimal way of engaging the material, as it allows us to appreciate the impact of the Neo-Tiantai approach to identification without being bogged down in specific conclusions.

The association of discontinuity with Local Coherence and continuity with Global Incoherence appears almost self-evident. Ziporyn uses the conception of eroticism existing in the juxtaposition between the pristine and the befouled in order to frame this essence as an expression of Intersubsumption, and thus the necessity of the simultaneous coexistence of each of these aspects within the other. Through this new understanding of the nature of eroticism, we are introduced to the further conception of erotic desire as being born out of a “snag in reversibility” (355) such that we are unable to conceive of that which is not us being us. The nature of another's being as fundamentally inimical to our own being makes the other appear to us as the embodiment of that which we are not, or the “snag in reversibility.” Ziporyn’s claim is that we are seeking to reach a continuous state of being through overcoming this snag in our absorption of this perfectly alien other. This makes some sense in light of the Three Truths. We naturally exist in a state of Local Coherence. In seeking to experience Global Incoherence, or a continuous state, we are seeking to form a connection with an antithetical Local Coherence. In melding these coherences, we have a unified experience which by the nature of its parts is contradictory. This contradiction is the experience of Global Incoherence as experienced from within a Local Coherence as part of the unification. In this way we are simultaneously aware of our own Local Coherence as well as the Global Incoherence of the union, and thus are aware of the Intersubsumption that binds the system as a whole and is the experience of erotic pleasure. This is an incredibly interesting application of Neo-Tiantai principles, but it really doesn’t describe my personal experience with eroticism as far as I can tell. This exploration therefore seems more applicable as an elucidative take on Bataille’s analysis of eroticism than as an expression of the nature of eroticism. However, Ziporyn continues by broadening this expression of erotic beauty as Intersubsumption into a discussion of our experience of beauty in general which seems more prone to being engaged in such an abstract intellectual manner.

**Beauty as Intersubsumption**

Ziporyn considers the experience of beauty to be the revelation of Intersubsumption between seemingly disparate things. This is expressed as finding unexpected harmony between distinct things. This understanding of beauty should therefore be considered as necessarily an active event, as it is intrinsically based upon this revelatory experience of harmony. This highlights the idea that beauty is not a quality that is capable of existing simpliciter, but rather exists as a relationship between things. Referring back to his engagement with eroticism, he offers the example of the experience of sexual beauty as being the perception of the possibility of the union between oneself and another. You are able to experience someone as beautiful through imagining the harmony between them and yourself that could be created through the combination of yourselves. This focus on the harmony between two persons, or the expression of a relationship between the two, seems to be a more compelling argument for the nature of
attraction as an expression of the important tripartite nature of Neo-Tiantai thought than the application of Neo-Tiantai categories to Bataille’s take on eroticism.

It’s important to note that “harmony” should not be taken to necessarily imply a peaceful, perhaps soothing, alignment between two things. Ziporyn offers the example of experiencing beauty with discordant music, or expressions of horror. He considers beauty in these cases to be found in the harmony found by the individual as a result of an alignment with the individual’s experience of disturbance with the disturbing object. This example only shows that the object does not need to be harmonious in the colloquial sense, rather than the relational bond itself being disharmonious. However, as Ziporyn says earlier, that which is most antithetical to ourselves can be considered as representative of ourselves. In a similar manner, that with which we experience the most discord between itself and ourself should be considered as in a negative form of harmony with ourselves. Therefore we should be able to experience beauty not just in that with which we are able to relate ourselves, but also with that with which we couldn’t possibly relate ourselves; for in this denial we find a harmony between ourselves and the negation of the object.

This conclusion ties in particularly well with Ziporyn’s claim that beauty must exist as unexpected harmony. The example he uses is that of the obvious survival handicap of a peacock's tail being in harmony with the physical prowess necessary to overcome such a handicap. The harmony is unexpected because we would expect to judge physical strength from displays of strength rather than weakness. A more direct aesthetic example is that of experiencing music as beautiful. I will consider here the case of repeated listenings of a piece of music. In this case it may seem that the unexpected nature of the harmony may be absent, yet we continue to find the piece beautiful. Ziporyn claims that in hearing a piece of music repeatedly we are gaining a deeper and thus new understanding of the piece with each encounter. I think this is certainly one aspect of it, but I don’t think it’s the only explanation. I think it must be considered that the unexpected harmony experienced is simply the same unexpected harmony experienced anew. For instance, I have no idea what arrangement of notes are played in my favorite song. I could identify them if heard, but have no representation of them in my head. In considering the poetry of the lyrics, which I can remember, I think his explanation of deeper understandings to be adequate. In considering the purely sensory experience of acoustics, which I’m unable to experience as a memory, it seems that sounds heard, lost, and heard again, are experienced anew each time. Ziporyn’s understanding of harmony as beauty is exceptional, while his condition of unexpectedness appears to me to be incomplete.

Opening of the Lotus and/as Humor

Throughout Being and Ambiguity Ziporyn references the understanding of “the opening of the lotus” as being able to be properly represented as a joke. Primarily he is interested in alluding to the setup/punchline dichotomy, and the relationship between the two which unifies them as a single expression of a joke. At this point I would like to address the nature of “the opening of the lotus” directly, rather than simply as an integral part of the Neo-Tiantai system. Understanding this revelatory action of re-definition seems to be of great value for its own sake. I will seek to elucidate the concept in general, with reference to Ziporyn’s use of the joke metaphor and subsequent analysis of humor as expressed within this understanding.
Ziporyn makes the claim that humor is the opposite of beauty, as humor is the experience of unexpected discord as opposed to unexpected harmony (381). As I proposed above in my example of a disharmonious experience with some object, I think we can therefore oppose this claim by saying that humor is in fact beauty as it is simply an expression of the negation of a harmony, which is thus representative of a harmony. However, such a direct contradiction of Ziporyn’s claim does not, to my mind, do any damage to the validity of his claim. We are simply expressing the same Intersubsumptive relationship as starting from a different local coherence. So it is quite appropriate as we continue to accept his assertion that the basis of the humorousness of a joke exists in the unexpected disharmony which it embodies.

The setup of the joke is not humorous by itself. The punchline of a joke is not particularly funny by itself either, for if it were it would require no setup. These two parts when brought into a relationship as a joke are funny. What is happening is that in experiencing the disharmony between the setup and punchline we are made aware of the discrepancy between our expectations and actual experience. “The opening of the lotus,” or humorousness, or recontextualization of the setup, is simply the realization that the setup is actually funny to us in spite of the very true fact that it wasn’t a moment ago. The nature of such as a revelatory action, rather than an existing state, is highlighted both in “getting” jokes and comedic timing. I think this experience of “getting the joke” is important to fully understanding the importance of “the opening of the lotus.” The active experience of the recontextualization of your assumptions is the experience of Intersubsumption as being identical to each of its parts. This experience is the nature of the non-exclusive center. If we approach Neo-Tiantai thought seeking states of being, we are left experiencing the ambiguity that is $X=X$. In approaching it from an experiential state, we are able to formulate a more determinable conception of what is.

It is worth noting that the meaning of the setup is in no way changed, but rather our relationship to, or understanding of, the setup that is changed. This is precisely the nature of “the opening of the lotus” in the revelation that the śrāvakas (those who specifically denied Buddha-nature) have always been of Buddha-nature. They have not changed, but rather their being is simply being expressed differently. The setup is not funny, the setup as part of the joke is funny and has always been funny, the setup is funny. The śrāvaka are not buddha, the śrāvaka will become buddha and thus have always been buddha, the śrāvaka are buddha. $X=X$, $X=X$ and $X=X$, $X=X$. Local Coherence, Global Incoherence, Centrality, Non-exclusive center, Local Coherence. It is the experience of realizing that our conceptions of these different expressions of being as being simultaneously equally true that we should take to illustrate “the opening of the lotus”; and additionally, understand as the basis of Neo-Tiantai thought.

Reflection

Ultimately Ziporyn does not make any strong claims as to the specific nature of things in an applicable frame of reference. Rather if we are to take this work seriously, he makes the only claim that is possible; that of everything as each thing and nothing, and each thing as everything and nothing, and nothing as everything and each thing. We are left not with new conclusions, but rather a new sense of the nature of our process. This is truly a work proposing a revolutionary conceptual mode, as Ziporyn acknowledges indirectly. In considering how Neo-Tiantai thought
could be used as the basis for restructuring our conception of understanding, I would recommend Sitar Terrass-Shah’s review of Jenco’s *Changing Referents*, also contained in this volume.

Ziporyn at times references the impermanent nature of Neo-Tiantai thought, which seems very appropriate. As a reader, I think the greatest value of *Being and Ambiguity* is the experience of reading it rather than any particular conclusions taken away. This is a text which must be engaged with, for it is an active experience in thought which by its nature cannot be simplified to a specific coherence. As an introduction to Neo-Tiantai thought, *Being and Ambiguity* is a journey well worth taking. As a bonus, through engaging with Neo-Tiantai thought *Being and Ambiguity* is able to offer some truly enlightening engagements with such vitally important topics as the nature of beauty. After many hours I still have no idea what *Being and Ambiguity* is about, past a peculiar feeling of understanding that which I cannot understand. Perhaps this is the true nature of being with ambiguity.
Practical Deparochialization: Transformative Learning in the Face of Resistant Others


Sitar Terrass-Shah, Wesleyan University ’17

Leigh Jenco’s *Changing Referents* is an exciting argument for and example of a new mode of cross-cultural theoretical engagement. She challenges current methods of self-conscious dialogue, proposing a more radical form of cross-cultural learning, through which we allow “others” to change the very terms on which we theorize. Putting her own theory in practice, Jenco consults late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese reform thinkers as theoretical resources, creatively engaging their arguments in the hopes of enabling transformational learning from others. If the alternative modes of engagement presented are to have disciplinary impact, however, they must be attractive not only to those of us for whom knowledge deparochialization is, for one reason or another, already a goal. Given that many of us share communities of learning with thinkers less interested in confronting ethnocentrism than we are, I ask what theoretical and practical resources Jenco might propose for encounters with what I will call resistant others. Finally, I suggest that we revisit the postcolonial theory Jenco is rather quick to reject, in the hopes that allying ourselves with postcolonial and other contemporary others in our learning communities will facilitate disciplinary transformation.

Jenco begins her project by articulating why we need alternatives to current attempts at cross-cultural engagement. Many contemporary social and political theorists, Jenco worries, fail to truly learn from foreign others, treating them instead as foils against which the particularity of our own traditions becomes apparent. Attempts to resist Euro-American ethnocentrism tend to focus on the postcolonial recognition that knowledge is necessarily socially embedded: this belief in the “intractability of context” suggests that the most we’ll achieve is a greater degree of self-reflexivity, accompanied by greater awareness of others as other (99). Though important for “provincializing” academic theory once seen as universal, such a mode of engagement is unambitious: in adopting it, we “risk denying theoretical capacity to the very thought we seek to acknowledge as worthy of engagement” (3). In search of a more satisfying, transformative form of cross-cultural engagement, then, Jenco turns to Chinese “Western Learning” debates.

Jenco examines arguments for cultural reform associated with the “Western Learning” project (*Xixue*), which describes a range of debates about adopting what were understood to be European forms of knowledge and knowledge production. Much like today, the impetus to rethink Chinese methods of knowing and theorizing came from an “unprecedented” level of contact between themselves and others, in which an ethnocentric worldview began to seem untenable. Unlike modern theorists, however, the Chinese thinkers on which Jenco focuses did not view the socially mediated nature of knowledge as evidence of the impossibility of learning
from others. Throughout the rest of the book, she examines the methods they used to both reproduce and innovate knowledge on other (in this case, Western) terms.

By using “Western Learning” thinkers as a theoretical resource, Jenco practices the very mode of engagement for which she argues: she consults thinkers who are both culturally and historically other, so that they might change the terms of her own theorizing. In what she refers to as “double reliance,” Jenco views them as both “theorists who articulate a practice-based vision of foreign learning and practitioners who draw from foreign ways of life to ground their theories of cross-cultural borrowing” (23). Indeed, as she notes, she engages them much as they engaged Western knowledge. The irony of the situation, Jenco suggests, is one we ought to embrace: these circular, unpredictable, mutually constitutive processes are perhaps necessary if we hope to allow encounters with different to change our referents.

The second chapter expands upon the differences between Chinese “culturalist” engagement with otherness and modern “particularist” models. Jenco analyzes Sinicization narratives, which were used to explain how “barbarians” became Chinese, to articulate the relationship between culture and knowledge. Chinese culturalism, as she reconstructs it, presents wen—provisionally translated as “cultural learning”—as something that is fostered by and sustained within communities through certain practices. It is therefore accessible to others, provided that they learn and adopt the appropriate practices; this is how, in the past, barbarians were able to become Chinese, and how, according to some reformers—most prominently in this chapter, Yan Fu—the Chinese might be able to appropriate Western wen. Culturalism avoids the dangers of stronger forms of universalism through its emphasis on learning and context rather than pre-given capabilities: adopting other wens is in theory possible for anyone, but requires ongoing learning in the right kinds of environments. Such practice might be quite difficult, even for those ostensibly “within” the tradition: even Chinese “insiders” had to practice the appropriate cultural forms to maintain their membership. Culturalism is, however, preferable to particularism, which acknowledges how cultural knowledge is historically and socially situated, but provides little recourse to change or escape our initial cultural affiliations.

The third chapter focuses on the “Chinese origins” thesis: by claiming Chinese origins for Western practices, Jenco argues, reformers were able to advocate for using and contributing to what were considered Western scientific and technical knowledge. The thesis allowed, for example, Western mathematics to be understood not as a supplement to ruxue (translated as Chinese scholarship90), but as a consequence of one of its constitutive elements, in this case Chinese algebra. Western math was then internally intelligible, able to be incorporated without departing from ruxue. Such genetic claims might seem extreme, but are not dissimilar to how political theorists approach “internal otherness,” consulting past others not as objects of historical or ethnographic study, but as fellows in a shared knowledge-producing community. By claiming continuity with “foreign” others, we allow them to discipline our current knowledge-production, instead of assimilating them within it.

The prospect of internalizing foreign others will likely trouble postcolonial thinkers, as it seems to ignore difficulties in representing and even recognizing foreign modes of knowledge-production. As Jenco puts it: “How can we possibly use [foreign knowledge] self-
transformatively, if we lack the very resources or background necessary to render that knowledge intelligible as such?” (93). The fourth chapter seeks to answer, or at least dismiss, such a question by looking to bianfa reform—a “changing of referents” focused on total re-alignment of Chinese institutions and practices. As Jenco reads them, bianfa thinkers recognize that institutions and practices both produce and are produced by bodies of thought. She contrasts this with subalternity theory, which, from a similar recognition, suggests that certain classes of otherness may be impossible to represent in certain necessarily particular institutions. While subalternity is defeatist, Jenco suggests, bianfa is not. Chinese conditions of knowledge production become the target of reform: if representation on existing terms is impossible, perhaps the terms should change.

The connection between institutions and practices and knowledge is further explored in the fifth chapter, which focuses on Tan Sitong’s reinterpretation of an indigenous dichotomy between dao and qi (way and vessel) or the parallel ti and yong (essence and function). Tan argues that, contrary to typical neo-Confucian readings, dao is not the foundation of qi, but rather relies upon it: the “vessels” hold the “way.” Adopting Western qi, then, can bring Western dao with it. In contrast to contemporary models of cross-cultural exchange as one-on-one dialogue, Tan’s emphasis on qi shifts the focus to the ability of institutions to faithf fully reproduce foreign practices. Jenco suggests we aspire to similar, if chastened, “authentic” representation of others’ institutions, values and practices.

The sixth chapter directly addresses the question of what types of institutions are necessary to bianfa. Reformers Liang Qichao and Yan Fu turn to the study of qun—communities or associations—for answers. Qun are both objects of knowledge and sites of knowledge production: Chinese thinkers must form qun in order to study them, producing knowledge that will change the nature of the very qun in which it was produced.

Jenco’s seventh and eighth chapters focus on temporal aspects of difference. In the former, she examines debates in which the differences between “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations were historicized. Some moderate thinkers, like Du Yaquan, focus on how both geographical and historical conditions shape cultures, arguing that cultural development is enabled by underlying, historically produced civilizational continuity. The Chinese cannot, therefore, merely graft a Western future onto the present, without interrogating the conditions that gave rise to the Western features they seek to emulate. Radical thinkers adopted other tactics, seeking to disassociate temporal difference from spatial difference either by separating newness from Westernness, as attempted by Huang Yuanyong, or by denying a Chinese past in favor of a Western one, as Chen Duxiu does. Chen argues that in order for temporal distinctions to be meaningful, the Chinese must abandon a cultural inability to change across time and instead adopt a dynamic (Western) history. The future does not consist of inevitable Westernization, but requires political choices in the present. The eighth chapter deals with what Jenco calls the “problem of the culturally unprecedented,” a term she introduces to reflect the temporal and spatial relationship between foreignness and indigeneity on the one hand and novelty and tradition on the other. Jenco presents arguments by Zhang Shizhao and Li Dazhao. Zhang argues that how novelty is constructed depends upon our understanding of the past. The concepts ‘new’ and ‘old’ do not exist independently, but are negotiated and contested in the present. Li presents a more discontinuous account of history, in which time is irreversible and
unceasing, but the past is perpetually open to reinterpretation. The contingency of concepts of novelty and tradition, along with possibilities for disruption and reinterpretation of the past, provide ways to acknowledge the impact of our pasts on our presents and futures without allowing our historical embeddedness to preclude the possibility of change.

In the final chapter, Jenco elaborates on the possibilities her examples might support, suggesting that we create new qun through which we treat “the terms of heretofore ‘different’ or ‘other’ space or time as referents for our own thinking in concert with others” (217). Such an approach avoids both indiscriminate cherry-picking and models of “dialogue,” which, Jenco complains, portray cross-cultural exchange as conversation between two “irreducibly situated interlocutors.” The ability to generalize others’ referents, however, relies on both collective and transtemporal institution- and community-building work. Drawing once more the Western Learning project, Jenco presents four types of activities involved in creating new qun in political theory, adapted from a list of tasks in Liang Qichao’s General Discussion: institutional reform of education, including a broadening and renegotiating of criteria of scholarly excellence; publication and dissemination of new knowledge; garnering financial support; and the rather vague “activity of personal development,” including building relationships with culturally and disciplinarily foreign others, learning new languages, and practicing new forms of interaction within one’s qun. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jenco’s particular suggestions fall short of her theoretical gestures: we may need to begin building new qun in order to imagine more radical transformations of our modes of knowledge production.

Jenco begins her project by asking “How and why might we want to learn from ‘foreign’ others?” (1). While she presents compelling arguments for why we need to engage in alternate modes of cross-cultural learning if we seek to deparochialize our theory, the question of why we might be motivated to do so quickly drops from view. As I–and I suspect much of the book’s audience–share Jenco’s commitment to deparochialization, I do not expect her to devote her project to debunking Western ethnocentrism. My concern, however, is that she is insufficiently attentive to the presence of resistant others in the communities in which our knowledge production necessarily takes place, and that such an omission might limit the possibility of transformational learning.

This concern proceeds from the account of knowledge production Jenco presents, in which thinking necessarily occurs in a political context. The mutually constitutive relationship between knowledge and institutions and practices is a theme throughout the Western Learning discourse she draws on, but here I will focus on her engagements with bianfa thinkers Yan Fu and Liang Qichao. Yan references the ti/yong (essence/use) dichotomy, arguing that different traditions of cultural learning have particular essences and functions, which are characteristics of one entity. The function of Western or Chinese learning corresponds to a Western or Chinese essence; one cannot expect to adopt Western knowledge without implementing Western practices. Both Yan and Liang advocated for qunxue—the study of groups, specifically “constituent groupings of socio-political organization at all levels” (153)—as a way to enact bianfa. Knowledge is meaningless outside of a social context–there is no ti that is not embodied in yong–so learning projects must account for and target the particular qun in which knowledge is produced. Social contexts are not intractable, however, but “remain permanently vulnerable to how learning assesses them, and to how agents acting within those contexts can use learning to
find ways of transforming them” (148). Jenco identifies two “pivots” of Liang’s reform project: the cultivation of talent through educational reform, and the proliferation of qun, which will enable the transformative learning of the first pivot (161).

The fact that our qun contain resistant others, then, does not prima facie invalidate transformational learning projects. Studying qun can create knowledge about qun that can challenge or reconfigure the qun in which that knowledge circulates. The presence of resistant others is not irrelevant, though. Because of the reliance of knowledge and knowledge production on its social context, the nature of our qun changes the nature of the knowledge we are able to produce. Insofar as resistant others are already members of our qun, our learning will necessarily be affected.

Failure to account for different members of our qun will therefore affect the success of our learning projects. The alternatives Jenco proposes are complicated by the presence of resistant others. Consider, for example, bianfa. According to bianfa logic, to treat others as theoretically capable is to remain open to the possibility of changing not only one’s knowledge or practices, but also one’s referents, the very terms on which knowledge is produced and evaluated. If, as I read her, Jenco is entreating us to allow for bianfa in our encounters with others, we are confronted with two possible outcomes, neither particularly appealing: either we allow that our encounters with resistant others might transform the terms of our theorizing, which in this case means remaining open to ethnocentrism; or we find ways to exclude resistant others from our knowledge production communities.

The first option is not, on all accounts, as undesirable as it might seem. The possibility of changing one’s referents to those of resistant, parochial others might lead to comparative philosophy projects like that of Huang Yong, who seeks to persuade mainstream philosophers to be interested in Chinese philosophy by using it to solve Western problems. Bianfa is in this case entirely one-sided; the onus falls on Chinese philosophers to prove their merit on Western terms:

It is, rather, our [people who do Chinese philosophy’s] duty to do things to generate interest in Chinese philosophy, particularly by showing that precisely on (at least some of) the issues that currently occupy mainstream Western philosophers, Chinese philosophy has some interesting things to say.91

Indeed, for some this may pose no problem: Huang’s work on the Cheng brothers92, for example, is thorough and philosophically interesting, and may well, on Erik Hall’s account, answer Western questions.93 Insofar as such attempts are successful, they might actually help in bringing resistant others around to deparochialization projects. If being parochial means “we” in the West are not doing good or thorough philosophy, we might be motivated to deparochialize even as we remain committed to our terms of knowledge production.94 Huang’s work hardly fulfills Jenco’s requirements, however, of a radical learning project. To borrow, as Jenco does, from Dipesh

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91 Huang 2016, 19.
92 Huang 2014.
93 See Hall’s chapter elsewhere in this volume.
94 This might be overly hopeful: Huang’s work seems get much more uptake in Chinese philosophical communities than Western ones.
Chakrabarty, we can understand Huang as presenting “minority philosophy,” which is assimilated by virtue of sharing rational and evidentiary rules.95

If, like Jenco, we are not satisfied with inclusion on Western terms, we might try to form qun without resistant others. Such qun, if successful, could perhaps manage more radical transformation, but also would risk reestablishing hierarchies, albeit new ones. Even if that is not a concern, it seems doubtful that small deparochial enclaves could effect the kind of change Jenco envisions. Liang Qichao presents qun-ing as something that can happen on different scales: “Several people qun, and create a family; several thousand qun and create a race; a million qun and create a state” (Liang in Jenco, 155). Nevertheless, he argues that larger, more complex qun are better at qun-ing than smaller ones, and that forming associations is necessary for “power and knowledge [to] be concentrated enough to have a positive effect on existing conditions” (161). If only a few of us are interested in deparochialization, our transformational projects seem likely to fail.

Neither bianfa—at least unmodified—nor exclusion of resistant others seem to support the type of transformational learning project for which Jenco is advocating. We need, then, other ways to begin changing referents with our qun, while still resisting ethnocentrism.

Jenco might resist the idea that bianfa and resisting ethnocentrism will conflict by reminding us that she is writing for a specific audience: “those transnational Anglophone academic communities that in the early twenty-first century enjoy privileged status as producers of knowledge but whose terms remain consistently ‘Europeanized’ and parochial” (218). Perhaps the need to change one’s referents applies only to those who have historically assumed that their referents are universal. Insofar as those of us encountering these resistant others might not enjoy this privileged status or operate on parochial terms, we could be held to a different standard. We could use our awareness of the particularity of knowledge as an excuse to deny resistant others theoretical capacity, as least when it comes to terms of knowledge production. This is, at least in principle, different than excluding them from our qun: we could continue to recognize their impact on our knowledge production, but select the ways in which we are open to their theorizing.

Selective bianfa seems difficult to justify, however, without risking essentializing difference. Once again, we are limited by the strength of Jenco’s earlier arguments. If we take seriously the insights of Zhang Shizhao and Li Dazhao, that the inscription of both temporal and spatial otherness is contingent rather than inevitable, and that these distinctions are therefore susceptible to continuous disruption and reinterpretation, we cannot select specific relationships between others for which bianfa applies. Jenco must, in some sense, address anyone interested in encountering any others, not merely privileged thinkers seeking to engage historically marginalized others.

Indeed, the Chinese thinkers she takes as models are engaged in learning from privileged Western others, though absent ones. Jenco acknowledges this as a possible source of irony:

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95 Chakrabarty 2000, 100.
If impending colonization and dominance by foreign powers is what motivated the dissatisfaction of Western Learning reformers and justified their pursuit of radical programs of reform, then my exhortation to learn from their approach to cross-cultural engagement may (at best) be unrealistic or impractical, and (at worst) irresponsibly dismissive of the unequal conditions of global power under which Western Learning thinkers forged their strategies for foreign learning (24).

If the Chinese reform thinkers were only interested in bianfa because of the threat of Western imperialism—in other words, if changing referents is only unidirectional and power-based—there is little point in attempting to engage resistant others. The very idea that bianfa might provide a model for deparochialization is, as Jenco notes, impractically or irresponsibly naïve. It is not the case, however, that only those about to be dominated are interested in changing referents. Jenco takes the similarities between existing attempts in political theory to address parochialism and the Western Learning project as sufficient grounds for comparison. Contextual differences in power dynamics do not preclude this comparison, because theory, on her account, is inherently involved in generalizing from particular contexts to others (19). If the Western Learning project has theoretical import for our present-day deparochializing project, it ought to be generalizable to other contexts as well. To limit its significance to a few specific contexts is to deny it theoretical capacity.

It is precisely because of my interest in taking Changing Referents seriously, then, that I want better approaches to encountering resistant others. It is difficult to see how we could bianfa while engaging resistant others and still retain our commitment to deparochialization, but perhaps other approaches learned from Chinese reform thinkers might be more useful. We might try to appeal to resistant others as Chinese origins scholars did to their contemporaries: we can argue that allowing culturally situated others theoretical import has Western precedent. Many of the thinkers in the Western canon are significantly “other” than present-day Anglophone philosophers, yet we align ourselves with them in ways that allow them to discipline us, going beyond ethnography or inclusion. We could use examples of “internal” otherness to illustrate the contingency of the concept, then arguing for consultation of contemporary cultural others on the basis of consistency. Or we could make use of Tan Sitong’s argument for the mutual constitution of dao and qi (way and vessel), implementing deparochial vessels— institutions and practices—in the hopes that a deparochial dao will follow.96

If all of these approaches seem inadequate, particularly without the attention to the institutions and terms of knowledge production that bianfa requires, it speaks to the aptness of Jenco’s title: it is the ability to change our referents that enables our cross-cultural engagement to be truly transformative. Without this component, it is difficult to imagine how we can enact the radical change for which Jenco argues. How, then, can we remain committed to her argument while also acknowledging the resistant other with whom we qun?

One possible recourse, I want to suggest, is the postcolonial theory, particularly subalternity, Jenco tends to reject. Jenco defines subalternity as a “particular class of difference

96 This requires, of course, that we can conceptualize “authentically deparochial” qi to which a deparochial dao could correspond. Even using Jenco’s concept of “chastened authenticity,” which does not require a “putatively discrete practice” to “rip-off” or even have exhaustive knowledge of, this seems difficult to generate (141-143).
or otherness whose very content—indeed, whose very recognition as different—is framed out of the discourse through which we may come to know (about) it” (96). The process of representing such subaltern otherness in a dominant discourse requires that we impose our dominant categories (perhaps erroneously) on it; in the process, otherness is necessarily cast as inferiority, a failure to fully meet the normative criteria of the categories we have imposed. While Jenco is aware of the danger of simply assuming sameness of categories and indeed places significant emphasis on social embeddedness herself, she objects to the notion that social context is intractable. On the postcolonial view, she claims:

the transformation of our knowledge communities is limited to what those communities think, rather than how and with whom they think. This assumption is grounded in the belief that the very context that lends knowledge its particular quality also constrains its migration into other, differently situated and differently contextualized activities (101).

Her frustration, then, is with the way in which intractability of context forecloses on the possibility of true theoretical engagement. As previously mentioned, theory is, for Jenco, involved in generalization by definition. If some knowledge cannot be generalized, we must deny it theoretical capacity. Subalternity—and perhaps even otherness that is representable, but marginalized—is therefore able to function as an excuse: if we are unable to learn from it, rather than merely about it (if that), the best we can do is recognize our own particularity and attempt humility about our own knowledge. We rest comfortably with our own referents, listening to others but not learning from them.

This type of cross-cultural engagement does not satisfy Jenco. In her conclusion, she asks whether there might not be “otherness that remains intractable to representation as political theory, and if so, how might its evidentiary rules demand transformations in how we organize scholarship?” (226). Encounters with what seems subaltern ought to impel us to attempt more radical changes of referents. While this insistence on engagement is admirable, it precludes the possibility that subalternity can be a strategic political claim. How might claims of subalternity help one in engaging with resistant others in one’s qun? I want to suggest that we approach subalternity theorists as others in the Jencoian sense, using bianfa logic.

To treat postcolonial theorists as others worthy of theoretical engagement, means, of course, allowing for the possibility that knowledge production will be transformed on their, not our, terms. In this case, we cannot deny the possibility of subalternity that lasts even as scholarship transforms. This is not, I think, incompatible with using subalternity as impetus for more radical bianfa. Many of the Western Learning strategies rely on the possibility of reinterpreting and breaking from the past, which in turn leads to how we imagine the future. This process occurs in the present and perpetually so: because the past and present are constantly subject to reinterpretation, we have no guarantee of where our transformation will take us. We can maintain the possibility of subalternity while still orienting ourselves to a future that seeks to avoid it.

This indeterminate future is also what makes retaining subalternity an attractive prospect. For May Fourth radical Chen Duxiu, China’s past had to be denied precisely because of the openness of the future. If modernization was inevitable, a modern future could be understood to
follow from a Chinese past as part of a universal trajectory. It is because of the indeterminacy of the future, however, that Chen emphasizes the need for deliberate political choices (183). Likewise, because we cannot know what is or is not finally possible, we must decide what commitments to make. The question of subalternity is not about what is epistemologically possible, but what we find politically helpful, as Jenco alludes to in the title of that chapter: “Why Learning from Others Is Political, Not (Only) Epistemological.” Rejecting subalternity is a good political choice when it opens up possibilities for deeper cross-cultural engagement within and between communities. I see another political strategy where Jenco perhaps does not, though: in allowing for the possibility—though not the inevitability—of subalternity.

David Haekwon Kim’s response to critiques of second order Eurocentrism, including an earlier piece from Jenco herself,97 might provide an example of the political value in allowing for the possibility of subalternity. Kim notes that it is possible to distinguish between different types of Eurocentrism—Eurocentrism about traditions, people or societies, or culture—and that if so, we can conceivably be more concerned about some types of Eurocentrism than others.98 While critiques of second order Eurocentrism tend to assume that privileging Western concepts necessarily translates to the privileging of Western societies, Kim argues that: “there is actually a logical gap in the inference from a thesis that a theory is undermined by Eurocentrism of traditions to the thesis that a people, many of whose members endorse that problematic theory, is harmed by Eurocentrism of traditions.”99 This is not to say that conceptual Eurocentrism is unproblematic. Kim’s point, rather, is that different priorities motivate different choices about how and what theory to engage. For postcolonialists, the abolition of oppression, supported as it is by certain Western philosophies, may warrant their use, even if the elimination of Eurocentrism of both people and traditions is an eventual goal. “The upshot for Jenco,” Kim concludes, “is that though she may be right in her critique…her account and that of postcolonial studies appear to have different evaluative priorities, though not radically different ones.”100 We can imagine an analogous situation with subalternity theorists: though Jenco may be right in her assessment of the theoretical dangers of subalternity, there may be situations in which other priorities come before our theoretical concerns. In such situations, claims of subalternity may be considered “worth” their theoretical cost. As Kim observes with the issue of Eurocentrism, priorities that warrant the use of subalternity may differ from Jenco’s, but likely not radically so.

This bring us to an even simpler strategic argument for more charitable engagement with postcolonial others: the possibility of forming alliances. My initial concern was that the presence of resistant others within our qun might interfere with our ability to engage in transformational cross-cultural learning projects. If we need to be open to changing our referents to form deparochial qun, but we need willing qun in order to begin changing our referents, where can we start? This is extremely similar to the problem of circularity met by Yan Fu and Liang Qichao: China needed certain (Western) knowledge to create better social conditions, but it was only through certain social conditions that it could obtain this knowledge (148). Qun-ing provides the solution: “the susceptibility [of qun] to transformation by new knowledge both about and within

97 See Jenco 2007.
98 Kim 2015, 163.
99 Kim 2015, 164.
100 Kim 2015, 164.
“them” avoids the circularity (167). We too, I think, must take qun-ing as the necessary starting point for reform.

We should then seek to incite transformation of our currently somewhat resistant qun from within. Qunxue can help “challenge or redraw the boundaries that contain [qun] and the historical and geographical continuities its members see as relevant” (167). Changing Referents may count as one example, but so might postcolonial theory that prompts greater self-reflexivity. In any case, having more members of our qun share our reform goals will help create more felicitous conditions for self-transformation. Insofar as building alliances—with postcolonial others, certainly, but perhaps with even those comparative theorists whose projects are merely inclusive—might help us transform our qun, it is a worthy political goal.

Jenco’s argument for more radical cross-cultural engagement in general and bianfa in particular is immensely appealing, which is exactly why I seek more approaches to ensure its practicality. Resistant others are a present reality: we must acknowledge their presence and develop strategies for encounters with them. I have argued for one such approach, in which we engage some of our contemporary others—particularly postcolonial thinkers—as Jenco engages the Western Learning scholars, allowing for the possibility of adopting their referents in place of our own. I suggest we should view this approach as a political choice that will facilitate forming alliances that may well help us change our terms of knowledge production, though likely not in the ways we anticipate.
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