

Introduction

Why Take Confucian Ethics Seriously?

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Many—though surely not all—people who have lived in Confucian societies have taken Confucian ethics seriously for hundreds of generations, but why should one study Confucian ethics today? One could do so in order to learn more about an ancient and unfamiliar school of thought or to understand or deepen one's understanding of some aspects of East Asian cultures. To be sure, these are legitimate and respectable objectives. But to approach the study of Confucian ethics in such ways is to take it only as something we can *learn about*, not something we can *learn from*. For the purposes of this volume, to take Confucian ethics *seriously* means that one does not see it simply as something East Asian or Confucian; to take Confucian ethics seriously is to be concerned with the contemporary philosophical relevance of the Confucian tradition.

An ethics can be understood simply as a description of the moral outlook of people remote to us in time, space, or point of view. But an ethics can also be taken in terms of what it purports to be: a collection of answers to ethical questions that are thought to describe, in part or whole, not how some people do live but how all should live. To take an ethics in this way allows one to engage it with an eye toward discerning its contemporary relevance: to defend and uphold its strengths, to criticize and oppose its weaknesses, to further pursue its arguments and lines of thought, to develop it with the aim of making it more robust, and to consider what we can learn from it that we cannot readily learn from other systems of ethics.

This volume takes Confucian ethics as a living ethical tradition, one that offers a range of principles, ideals, and arguments of contemporary relevance and

philosophical interest. While we, the editors, have endeavored to maintain the highest standards of historical scholarship and textual evidence, we have sought contributions that focus on and explore issues that have more than historical or cultural interest. Our volume is addressed to fellow philosophers and those interested in ethics in general, though we hope that fellow scholars and students of Confucianism will appreciate it as well. The issues discussed in this volume, such as the nature of virtue, the distinction between the public and the private, the value of spontaneity, the place of sympathy in moral judgment, the meaning of what it is to be humane to people, the way to handle multiple values, the relation between trust and democracy, are all living issues in play in contemporary philosophical discourse and debate. Our contributors take Confucian ethics seriously by showing that they are not satisfied with merely stating or explicating Confucian views; they consider how far such views remain philosophically significant and perhaps even compelling in contemporary times.

The task of taking Confucian ethics seriously in the sense that we have described above can involve one or more general approaches. For example, one can approach the study of the Confucian tradition primarily as a task of philosophical retrieval. One's goal might be to show, through interpretation and analysis, that the Confucian tradition advocates principles, ideals, or arguments that support, augment, or extend our understanding of contemporary ethics. The aim of such an approach always is to find what is philosophically significant and relevant about Confucian ethics; what one finds can be more or less familiar and in some cases may be distinctive if not unique. An alternative is to approach Confucian ethics primarily as a task of philosophical reconstruction. Such an approach relies more on the spirit or implications than the exact words or teachings of traditional Confucian philosophers. The goal is not to present some Confucian way of thought as it is or has been, but rather to make it more tenable, sophisticated, and compelling for contemporary consideration. Confucian ethics is taken not as something completed and ready for incorporation or adoption, but rather as something still developing and very much a work in progress. As we see in the course of our brief descriptions of the contributions to this volume, the chapters in it employ one or more of the approaches discussed above.

In "What It Means to Take Chinese Ethics Seriously," Heiner Roetz criticizes a major and influential approach to the contemporary study of ancient Chinese thought—what he describes as the "contrastive approach." The contrastive approach differs from an equally influential yet earlier Sinological approach, which he deems the "comparative approach." The latter tries to understand Chinese ways of thinking by comparing them with Western models and looks

for similarities; the former avoids using Western categories to analyze what it regards as a remote and alien culture and tends to look for differences rather than similarities. The comparative and contrastive approaches, however, share some common ground. Both of them “objectify” what they study; they take Chinese authors as objects of study rather than people who made claims that they regarded as true. But, when traditional Chinese authors said or wrote what they did, they were asserting the validity of what they said or wrote. Roetz insists that in order to take them *seriously* we must interpret their claims as validity claims and not just as descriptions of the views of various authors. In his contribution, Roetz refers to the “eye-level principle” and “communicative hermeneutics,” which describe an interpretive posture that takes the authors as our equals and understands them as making validity claims that we should assess and respond to, rather than just as providing texts to be analyzed and expositied. If Confucian ethics is valuable as a resource for contemporary ethics, then certainly it must contain claims that are true and valuable and not simply descriptions of what ancient Chinese people thought or believed.

In chapter 2, “The Handling of Multiple Values in Confucian Ethics,” Kam-por Yu employs an interpretation of the Confucian concept of *zhongyong* 中庸—often understood as denoting something like a sense of a “harmonious mean”—not only to shed light on the meaning and coherence of certain seminal Confucian texts, but also as a contribution to the philosophical understanding of ethical pluralism. Yu rejects two popular interpretations of the concept of *zhongyong*, the first of which understands it as recommending a moderate position between two extremes and the second, which interprets it as being able to hit upon the right response by cultivating an unbiased inner state. Instead, he argues that *zhongyong* is a way to handle multiple values. Yu argues for his preferred interpretation by setting up two tests that any adequate understanding of *zhongyong* must meet and then shows how his meets these criteria better than the most popular and influential alternatives.

Yu’s interpretation of *zhongyong* is relevant not only for understanding the Confucian texts in which this concept appears, but also for our understanding of the nature of morality. According to Yu’s understanding of *zhongyong*, ethical thinking contains more than the distinction between good and bad or the choice between right and wrong. Often we are faced not just with a single good but many, and these many goods may compete, conflict, and resist reduction—either one to the other or to some independent third standard. In such cases, the right thing to do is not to pick one value over another but to strike the best balance among these competing claims to our moral attention. Moreover, in order to fully or adequately appreciate the entire range of values we are facing,

we need to consider different perspectives on the moral issue before us, not because all perspectives are equally valuable, but because the values that can be seen from one perspective may not be seen or adequately appreciated by another. The view here is not that human values are relative or subjective but that they are complicated, and so it is unrealistic and harmful to think that we can fully appreciate them by adopting just one perspective. In ethical debate, often it is not that one side is completely right and the other completely wrong; rather, different perspectives often have distinctive and important insights into the complex issues involved. In order to work out an ethically adequate solution, we must discover and fully appreciate what each perspective has to offer and give due recognition to the legitimate values upheld by each. This is not to say that different perspectives are equally right, but that each may offer us a way to see important values that cannot be seen or fully appreciated from other points of view.

In chapter 3, “Humanity or Benevolence? The Interpretation of Confucian *Ren* and Its Modern Implications,” Qianfan Zhang analyzes and evaluates different conceptions of the traditional Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 by exploring the implications these hold for a range of practical issues in contemporary politics and social justice. He illustrates and motivates his analysis by discussing the particularly tragic case of Sun Zhigang, a young college graduate who was unjustly detained by the Guangzhou city police and later died from injuries suffered in a beating by fellow inmates in the detention center.

Zhang’s chapter looks at an important theoretical question in Confucian ethics that has direct and serious practical implications for contemporary political and social theory and policy. His first and primary aim is to provide an account and analysis of the Confucian concept *ren*. Zhang identifies two main lines of thinking on this issue within the Confucian tradition. The first is associated with the concept of “humanity”—the principle of respecting people as individual persons with dignity. The second is associated with “benevolence”—the view that we should treat people with care because they are centers of well-being and suffering. Zhang argues that these two lines of thinking about *ren* do not enjoy equal status in contemporary ethical and political philosophy, and they have dramatically different implications regarding the obligations a government has toward its people. According to Zhang, the first conception of *ren* is not sufficiently developed in traditional Confucian sources, while the second is well developed but proves to be ethically inadequate in a number of respects. Zhang takes Confucian ethics seriously by criticizing certain weaknesses in Confucian views about “benevolent government” and by pointing toward a way to reconstruct Confucian political philosophy based on the Confucian concept of

ren that regards human beings not simply as receivers of benefits but also as individuals with moral worth and dignity.

In “East Asian Conceptions of the Public and Private Realms,” Chun-chieh Huang explores a problem that has attracted a great deal of attention from a wide variety of Confucian thinkers. At the same time, his central concern—the distinction between the “public” and “private” realms—continues to have great contemporary relevance—in the West as well as throughout East Asia—and remains the focus of lively philosophical debate. One of the many virtues of Huang’s contribution is that it provides a vivid illustration of the richness and complexity of the Confucian tradition. It shows that Confucian ethics is not a single static set of principles, ideals, and arguments but is an ongoing discussion and debate revolving around a constellation of common themes. The tradition has continued to develop throughout its long and impressive history, and this process remains active and ongoing.

Huang shows in a careful and convincing manner the ways in which the concepts of “public” and “private” changed—in some respects quite dramatically—from the Western Zhou (1045?–771 BCE) down to the Warring States period (403–222 BCE). He explains how a range of classical Confucian philosophers conceived and handled this perennial problem, and how debate about this issue continued throughout the tradition’s history and across a number of different East Asian cultural contexts. Huang argues that to a significant extent, the central problems that motivated and defined this debate remain to be solved. For example, he shows why appeals to higher standards such as *tianli* 天理 (Heavenly principle) or *tianxia* 天下 (the world) displace rather than resolve the problem of justification. Such proposals offer no clear criteria and only serve to open opportunities for hijacking and manipulating these purported “higher standards.” Though many people might agree that “Heavenly principle” should prevail, no one can provide any clear and persuasive explanation for ascertaining what Heavenly principle directs us to do. As Huang points out, this tends to leave such decisions in the hands of reigning elites. If Huang’s analysis is correct, then East Asian Confucians—like their Western counterparts—still have not resolved “the conflict between the public and private realms,” and further effort is required.

In “Trust within Democracy: A Reconstructed Confucian Perspective,” Julia Tao explores the nature of trust and its relationship to democracy. Through a critical evaluation of some of the prominent contemporary literature on trust and political theory, Tao analyzes different kinds of trust: strategic trust and moral trust, general trust and particular trust, and their implications for governance in a world of diversity. She asks whether trust is in any sense necessary

for democratic governance and where one might look for the source of such trust in a contemporary society.

Tao explores the cultural roots of trust and in particular resources for the cultivation of trust. She points out that even the best account of trust in regard to governance, “offers no philosophical analysis of the importance of moralistic trust for the purpose of government or for the ideal of democratic governance.” She suggests we turn to Kongzi (Confucius) and the Confucian tradition as a philosophical resource able to supply these critical, missing features of our understanding of trust.

Tao shows that Confucian trust is an expression of moral trust and that it begins—as scholars such as Uslaner suggest—in the family and in particular from our relationship with parents. But Confucians insist that this is just the first blossoming of a more general and robust virtue that must be enlarged and extended to inform the common enterprises we share with nonfamily members. This effort of extension can give rise to civic trust and a kind of civic friendship that finds its final expression in benevolent government.

Confucians regard trust as a fundamental virtue for family, civil society, and government, which provides the basic environment for human thriving. As Tao points out, the Confucian conception of trust can serve to remind us of “our shared fate and mutual responsibility at all levels of our human connectedness, at both the local level and the global level.” Tao suggests that this view of the self and its potential flourishing puts trust back into democratic governance to underpin equal respect and mutual concern for humankind in order to achieve not only a stable democracy, but also and more importantly a stable world order.

In “A Defense of *Ren*-Based Interpretation of Early Confucian Ethics,” Shirong Luo argues that early Confucian ethics offers an example of what Michael Slote calls an “agent-based” virtue ethics. Agent-based ethical theories are distinctive for holding that “ethical assessment be based entirely on the admirableness or reprehensibility of the inner qualities of the agent.” Luo argues that Kongzi offers a special form of agent-basing, one centered on the virtue of *ren* (benevolence). He refers to this distinctive early Confucian view as a *ren*-based theory.

Luo begins chapter 6 by arguing against a range of other interpretations of Kongzi’s ethics. He discusses and rejects the possibility that Kongzi ultimately bases his ethics on a prior conception of the way (*dao*) or ritual (*li* 禮). The former would offer an example of *dao*-basing, while the latter would be a case of a *li*-based ethical theory. He proceeds to argue against the influential inter-

pretation of D. C. Lau, who argues that Kongzi's ethics is *yi*-based; that is to say, it depends on a prior conception of what is *yi* 義 (right).

Luo then makes his case that Confucian ethics is best understood as *ren*-based. Such an interpretation entails that Confucian ethics is a form of virtue ethics but one quite distinct from the kind of virtue ethics system that one finds in thinkers such as Aristotle, which Slote has argued are agent-prior as opposed to agent-based. Kongzi's ethics shares much in common with other agent-prior ethical theories, such as Nel Noddings's ethics of care, though Luo has argued in his "Relation, Virtue, and Relational Virtue: Three Concepts of Caring" (*Hypatia*, 22.3, 2007) that Kongzi's ethics avoids a number of philosophical problems that remain challenges for Noddings's view.

Luo's chapter offers an excellent example of both philosophical retrieval and reconstruction. He aims not only to present Confucian ethics as it has been, but also as it could be. He seeks to strengthen Kongzi's original view by extending some of its implications in light of recent insights in ethical theory. As Luo says, "A recasting of Kongzi's moral teachings in agent-based virtue ethics terms will enable us to make cogent arguments for its relevance to many issues within as well as beyond the purview of ethics." He also intends his account of early Confucian ethics to contribute significantly to contemporary debates about the nature of ethics in general and virtue ethics in particular, arguing that it holds exceptional value for our understanding of moral education. Unlike many contemporary versions of virtue ethics, Confucian ethics is not just a theory about the meaning of being virtuous, but also a theory about "how we should acquire virtue, i.e. the issue of moral self-cultivation."

Justin Tiwald's contribution to our volume relies on an exposition of central features of the philosophy of Dai Zhen, an important Qing dynasty Confucian, to set and explore a range of issues in contemporary moral psychology. Specifically, Tiwald presents Dai Zhen's teachings as offering a more plausible and powerful account of the role that sympathy should and must play in moral understanding. In "Is Sympathy Naive?: Dai Zhen on the Use of *Shu* to Track Well-Being," Tiwald begins by discussing the widely held view that sympathy offers us a way to discover and appreciate what is good and bad for creatures such as ourselves. He argues that the common conception of sympathy is incapable of guiding us to such knowledge in a reliable or adequate way. If we think of sympathy simply in terms of perspective taking—imaginatively taking up another person's point of view—it will lead us to confer value on too broad and undisciplined a set of desires. Sympathy in this naive sense condones desires uncritically and is not a good guide for understanding what truly is in another person's best

interests. Dai Zhen's account of *shu* 恕 (sympathetic understanding)—a term of art that appears in the earliest Confucian texts and has commanded attention and commentary throughout the tradition—is more complex and plausible than the simple perspective-taking account of sympathy.

Dai Zhen's interpretation of *shu* does not entail making the common mistake of simply projecting one's own desires onto another, nor does it lead one to take all the actual desires of a person equally seriously. For a variety of reasons, one's own desires often are not a good way to determine what is really in the best interests of another person, especially if we are aiming at the good of the other *for her own sake*. However, some desires that a person may happen to have are of no moral value, while other desires that she does not have might be very much in her best interests. Dai is concerned only with certain kinds of desires; he refers specifically to the "ordinary feelings of human beings" (*ren zhi changqing* 人之常情). Such desires are rooted in human nature and are universal, at least under the right counterfactual conditions.

The ordinary feelings of human beings are not as whimsical or insatiable as our unevaluated, individual desires. Unlike the latter, "ordinary" desires are required for "life fulfillment" (*sui sheng* 遂生). This important concept sets the nature, purpose, and scope of a particular set of desires that have special ethical status, for these desires describe in outline a common human conception of personal well-being. Dai Zhen's account of *shu* provides a standard for distinguishing between desires that should be counted ethically and desires that can be taken less seriously or altogether ignored from the ethical point of view. It does not have many of the problems that plague the common conception of sympathy described above and offers a significant contribution to our understanding of human moral psychology.

In "The Nature of the Virtues in Light of the Early Confucian Tradition," Eirik Lang Harris uses an analysis of certain aspects of early Confucian ethics to challenge and amend an important and influential contemporary philosophical account of the nature of the virtues. Philippa Foot, in her justly famous essay "Virtues and Vices," argues that virtues are related to the will and serve as correctives, in the sense that in order for something to be a virtue, it must counteract some temptation or augment some deficiency in human behavior that stands in the way of our leading good lives. Moreover, such temptations and deficiencies are things that we as human beings are inclined to suffer. It is only by choosing to cultivate virtue that we can shape ourselves to act for the good in a reliable fashion.

Harris begins by showing that being a corrective is only a contingent feature of at least certain virtues. If the world or human nature were different,

such traits of character would still be needed to live well—and hence would still qualify as virtues on a widely accepted conception of what virtues are—but they would not stand as correctives to temptations or deficiencies. Harris goes on to argue that self-love is plausibly understood as a virtue, and one that bears many similarities to other so-called corrective virtues. And yet, when properly understood, self-love clearly is not corrective, even in a contingent way.

Harris draws on resources in the early Confucian tradition and especially the *Mengzi* to demonstrate that there is an entire class of virtues, which he calls “inclinal virtues,” that cannot plausibly be understood as correctives. He describes such traits of character by saying that “inclinal virtues are virtues due to their being good inclinations, traits that incline one toward the direction of what is good.” For example, in *Mengzi* 2A6, Mengzi argues that all normal human beings possess “sprouts of virtue” that incline them toward good actions of various kinds. These sprouts do not arise as counterbalances to temptations or motivational deficiencies; rather, they are natural *inclinations* rooted in human nature. Although it is true that something like the will is needed to focus on and develop such virtuous inclinations, in such cases, volition is not acting in opposition to natural desires and tendencies. If this account of human nature contains any grain of truth, then Harris’s arguments appear quite compelling, and we must enlarge and enrich our conception of the virtues.

In the final chapter, “The Values of Spontaneity,” Philip J. Ivanhoe seeks to realize several related goals. His primary aim is to present an account of two general conceptions of spontaneity as a normative ideal that are found in early Chinese philosophy. The first, “untutored spontaneity,” is more characteristic of early Daoist thinkers, while the second, “cultivated spontaneity,” is most often found in thinkers from the Confucian school. The former describes a type of action that arises with little or no prior training or reflection and is thought to flow out of natural dispositions to perceive, feel, evaluate, and act in certain ways. The latter describes a related kind of action, but one that can only be realized after a concerted and sustained course of training. Untutored spontaneity reflects unadulterated nature, while cultivated spontaneity manifests an acquired and internalized “second nature.” Both types of action though are thought and felt to connect one with patterns, processes, and forces greater than one’s individual self and thereby provide one with a highly valued sense of belonging in and to the world. In the case of untutored spontaneity, the deeper, grander scheme is Nature, while in the case of cultivated spontaneity, culture or tradition serves as a kind of Second Nature.

Ivanhoe presents his two forms of spontaneity as ideal types and notes that one rarely finds pure forms of either. Nevertheless, these types are helpful guides

for understanding two general visions about the fundamental grounds for ethics in early China. While the advocates of untutored and cultivated spontaneity often hold different views about the value and reliability of such things as our uncultivated inclinations or traditional moral standards, they both insist on the importance of spontaneity when describing their ideal ethical agents and the lives they lead. A proper grasp of their respective conceptions of spontaneity is an excellent way into their ethical philosophy and arguably represents an essential, though often underappreciated, aspect of their views.

Ivanhoe concludes the chapter by suggesting that his study of spontaneity in early Chinese philosophy holds significant promise for ethics more generally. First, if we understand ethics to have among its concerns an account of what human beings value, then the widespread intuitions about the value of spontaneity—shared by contemporary people in both the East and West—offer at least *prima facie* evidence that early Chinese discussions of spontaneity may help us to understand not only the early Chinese but ourselves as well. Second, Ivanhoe shows that certain prominent Western thinkers invoke their own distinctive conceptions of spontaneity in the course of presenting their ethical philosophies. These references to spontaneity are overlooked by contemporary expositors because spontaneity is not thought of as an ethical term of art or even as a central normative concept. Ivanhoe suggests that an understanding of early Chinese views of spontaneity can help us understand not only our own intuitions, but also prominent members of the Western philosophical tradition more accurately and deeply. Once we return to these familiar texts with spontaneity in mind—we find it almost everywhere.

The nine chapters forming this volume focus on a broad range of topics, employ a spectrum of philosophical styles, and pursue a variety of different aims in the field of practical and theoretical ethics. Our contributors represent a selection of approaches and interests but are united in their attempt to take Confucian ethics seriously as an equal participant in a larger global conversation about human value and well-being. Taking Confucian ethics seriously, in the sense we intend, requires one to employ a certain critical conception of charity. We assume that the East Asian thinkers whose work we present here were sincerely expressing views not only that they took seriously, but also that they thought others should as well. One of their aims in writing the texts that we read was to convince other people of the correctness of their views and to move others to adopt those views. To take the thinkers seriously is to honor this original intent. Because we are separated from these philosophical conversation partners both culturally and temporally, in order to give their views a fair hearing we must, at least initially, endeavor to understand them as best we can

within their particular historical and cultural context. However, with such an understanding in hand, we must then move on to question and evaluate the views they advocate. Taking them seriously entails an obligation to disagree, when appropriate, as well as to interpret, but it opens up the possibility of learning from as well as about other points of view.

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