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Confucianism and its Contexts:

New Research in Confucian Political Learning

Introduction

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Why should political theorists, such as readers of this journal, engage Confucianism? Despite its ancient vintage, this philosophy (or perhaps more precisely, “body of thought”) has not long been on the radar screens of Anglophone political theorists, except perhaps in relation to some unsavory positions in international politics. The association of “Confucianism” with historically non-democratic states has given rise to numerous apologetics defending its logic in the name of an authoritarian elite (Bell, 2006, 2015; Zakaria, 1994)—something the governments of Singapore and the People’s Republic of China have used to their advantage. These associations have unfortunately colored the term with a tinge of cultural essentialism or reactionary nativism, further reinforced by the claims of academic philosophers such as Tongdong Bai that study of a narrow (and historically indefensible) set of core Confucian texts can explain “the Chinese mind” (Bai, 2012: 5). Attempting to rescue the insights of Confucian learning from its politicized appropriations has become a veritable cottage industry within comparative philosophy circles. Unfortunately, these debates also focus on the classical sources—and a growing, albeit largely self-referential, English-language scholarship—while excluding a large part of the

historically relevant Confucian canon.¹ In the process, they threaten to reify the thought of ancient China as the origin of distinctive “schools” or “isms” that somehow endure as coherent traditions outside of particular social or political contexts (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan, 2003).

These (mis)appropriations add to the morass of interpretations that attend translation of *ruxue*—a heterogenous bundle of scholarly traditions and commitments, stretching out over more than two millennia across eastern Asia, with varying and sometimes downright minimal or nonexistent links to the historical figure of Confucius himself—into the English reification “Confucianism” (for an overview of this complex history see Jensen, 1997). Its longstanding yet sometimes ambivalent association with governance—whether in terms of its ideological deployment by dynastic houses, its promulgation by local elites, or the background assumptions it offered to active members of the public—only further complicates the picture of what it amounts to, and how it might (or even should) be corralled into use as a “philosophy” or “political theory” (see, e.g., Chen, 2003; Peng, 2003). As Benjamin Elman notes in his magisterial study of evidential learning (*kaozheng*), the Qing-era historicist turn of *ruxue* that is almost systematically ignored by contemporary political theorist and philosophers: “it is hard to think of any idea responsible for more fuzziness in writing about China than the notion that Confucianism is one thing” (Elman, 2001: xxi).

Yet despite these interpretive confluences and conflicts, political theorists cannot, and should not, avoid engaging Confucius or the texts and schools associated with him. This is so for several reasons. The vast textual output of Confucian learning (a more accurate English

translation of *ru*xue) ranges from redactions and reproductions of canonical texts, to the hermeneutical traditions represented by influential commentaries of key thinkers, some of them transmitted for centuries if not millennia (Makeham, 2003). The sheer volume of this material must easily dwarf that available for any major scholarly tradition—including European liberalism—and suggests its massive historical importance over time and space for very large numbers of people. It is true that there necessarily lies ahead a great deal of work in just coming to grips with the implications of such a literate and geographically widespread body of work for existing forms of academic knowledge such as political theory. But to exclude Confucian ideas from our study of political thinking would be to do ourselves—not to mention our very subject of research—a great disservice. Carrying forward Confucian teaching or forms of knowledge-production within the discipline is perhaps, at this stage, a prohibitively ambitious goal. But we may nevertheless examine how its associated texts, arguments, traditions or practices might challenge how we do business. Although its sheer heterogeneity prevents a full accounting of how it might productively challenge existing academic dogma, we might consider a salient example drawn from another discipline.

Working in the fields of anthropology and religious studies, Michael Puett has argued that there exists a distinctive indigenous ritual theory in early Chinese Confucian texts overlooked by philosophers, such as the *Book of Rites*, which provides both an alternative and rejoinder to contemporary theories of religion which claim their humanism as a distinctively modern feature. Because these early Chinese ritual theories “were based upon working out the implications of the ways that rituals were explicitly operating,” they did not

work on the register of belief (as do contemporary ritual theories, beholden to Protestant political theology; see Asad, 1993). Rather, they worked on the register of what Puett calls the “as if.” Ritualistic constructions of “as if” worlds enable us to “alter the relationship between the participants” in such ritual (Puett, 2013: 99) by enabling new spaces from which to view such relationships, and in which to rehearse the sensibilities appropriate to their ideally realized forms. Puett cites as a key example the ritual of mourning for a recently deceased ruler in the *Book of Rites*:

Now, according to the way of sacrificing, the grandson acted as the impersonator of the king’s father. He who was made to act as the impersonator was the son of he who made the sacrifice. The father faced north and served him. By means of this, he made clear the way of a son serving his father. This is the relation of father and son (Puett, 2013: 98, citing “Ji tong,” *Liji [Book of Rites]*, 131/26/14).

As Puett explains, in this particular ritual,

The son plays the role of the grandfather, and the father—the living ruler—plays the role of the son to his father—who is actually his own son. And it is precisely through this reversed role-playing that the relation between father and son—the living son to his living father, and the living father to his deceased father—is made clear (Puett, 2013: 98).

Through such reverse-role-play, participants in this ritual could see with greater clarity “the disjunction between the world of ritual and the world of the everyday” (Puett, 2013: 99; see also Seligman et al., 2008). This self-evident disjunction does not pose a rupture, but rather creates a new space from which to consider the relationship between participants. In doing so, this ritual theory emphasizes the understudied role of ritual in our daily life, while providing an alternative to ritual theories which turn on belief, conscience, and Christian forms of divinity.

This set of essays in this volume is inspired by such potential for theoretical enrichment when the resources of such historically influential (but overlooked) texts are drawn into analysis, and when their contexts in larger worlds of practice are taken into account. Accordingly, we take on Confucius and Confucianism in a new way. Our hope is to avoid much of the cultural and intellectual essentialism that bedevils attempts to present Confucian learning as compelling and relevant. Because essentialism derives in large part from a lack of attention to contextual particularity, it is perhaps not surprising that these essays combat it by focusing on the productive relationship between what we might call Confucian learning and its contexts. These contexts are not only historical but also institutional, personal, and political: they situate Confucius among his contemporaries, within his own past, and amid the range of debates his ideas spawned in later centuries.

Attention to these contexts, we hope collectively to argue, does not necessarily confine Confucian claims to their place of origin or time of utterance. To the contrary, only through

such rich contextualization can these ideas speak across time and place to provoke the kind of analogies that make truly global and comparative political thought possible. In fact, two of the essays (by Kim and Jenco) examine how their research material itself provides resources for asking such methodological questions about the purpose of historical context for intellectual inquiry—contributing, that is, to a broader discussion about the nature of comparative method shared across philosophy, history, and political theory among other disciplines.

Youngmin Kim's examination of Confucius' historical vision thus suitably inaugurates this set of essays. Typically Confucius has been seen either as a dry traditionalist, or as a propagator of false and misleading claims about the historical past of the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE) whose cultural and ritual practices he hoped to emulate. Rather than slot Confucius into either side of this binary, Kim notes how Confucius' claims about the past seem to involve a form of meta-knowing: a recognition of the subject of knowing as tractable to virtuous cultivation, and thus as capable of forming critical distance between her- or himself and the object which s/he knows. In short, the subject of knowing for Confucius must be conscious of the epistemological limits of her or his own belief. As Kim puts it, "Confucius constructs the subject not as one who is passively shaped by the power of supernatural beings but as an active agent whose subjectivity is continuously shaped through his or her engagements within multiple and complex spaces that the meta-consciousness creates" (Kim, this issue, XX). Given this, Kim argues, we might understand Confucius' frequent references to the Zhou dynasty to be operating as an imagined signifier rather than a

set of historical claims, but where each of these requires the other to make their content imaginable. The Zhou, on this view, becomes “tenseless” for Confucius; “The untensed character of this conceptual Zhou,” Kim explains, allows Confucius (or ourselves) “to identify with, resurrect, and relive the life of the past in its totality” (Kim, this issue, XX). His lucid and innovative analysis takes Confucius’s epistemological arguments seriously, as a means of explaining Confucius’ own historical vision for reading the past.

Michael Nylan’s contribution similarly challenges existing dogma about Confucian ideas by attending to a different kind of context: that of Confucius among his interlocutors and friends, and of the persona of Confucius as invoked across a variety of Warring States texts. Asking whether the so-called Daoist Zhuangzi is really a “closet Confucian” in his support for what he takes Confucius to be doing, Nylan demonstrates the “composite” nature of what (or who) we might interpret as “Confucius.” Although current scholarship tends to see Confucius as the originator of a distinctive “school” of thought called Confucianism, Nylan argues that taking textual passages in context will reveal “the marked propensity of the early compilers [of these texts] to borrow ideas and switch personae, which renders modern sectarian talk about “schools” wildly anachronistic” (Nylan, this issue). More to the point, examining how Confucius is portrayed in the text of the *Zhuangzi* reveals that Zhuangzi’s critique of Confucius is not that he is a reactionary, but that his disciples—like those of any master—fail to intuit his own hard-won insights about the Way. Zhuangzi and Confucius, then, are not proponents of two diametrically opposed schools of “Confucianism” and “Daoism” but rather two personae of longstanding and mutually fructifying association. Her

analysis suggests, then, that those who hope to engage “Confucianism” must in some senses discard that reification in favor of recognizing the original context of discussion, mutual interaction, and argument across all lines of thought that comprised the intellectual firmament of early China.

The subjects of the next two essays date to very different points in time, but the essays share the same goal. Peter Ditmanson’s discussion of imperial family matters at the Ming court, and Leigh Jenco’s analysis of an early twentieth century debate about the status of the Chinese past, both show how elite forms of Confucianism posed questions for political practice, but also offered a distinctive set of resources for solving novel dilemmas of action and thought. Ditmanson’s essay “Moral Authority and Rulership in Ming Literati Thought” is distinctive for its deep reading of Ming debates that identify the actual ritual and institutional context in which Confucian notions of virtue, particularly within the family, played themselves out historically. Modern Confucian revivalists have fixated on the virtue of “filial piety” (*xiao*), that is, reverence and respect for one’s parents, as a distinctive and core Confucian value (Chan and Tan, 2012). Yet Ditmanson shows that a broader and more complex cosmology is at work, linking personal or inner forms of normative order with the empirical order of governmental institutions and decisions. During the Ming dynasty, considerations about who had the power to interpret Confucian doctrine and bring it to realistic fruition determined power relationships within and between families, regulated dynastic lines, and even in some cases acted as a form of constitutional constraint on the ruling house. Although some political theorists have recently asserted the novelty of reading

Confucian ideas in a distinctively political (rather than ethical or moral) way (el Amine 2016), Ditmanson's contribution here demonstrates that its political features have long been taken as given, debated, and institutionalized.

Jenco's essay concludes this special issue by examining how Confucianism has been reified, criticized, and in some cases revived and defended during modernization movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She brings contemporary philosophical defenses of Confucianism into conversation with an early twentieth century discussion among Chinese academics about the possibilities of viewing Chinese thought as globally relevant, modern, and useful. Consonant with the aims of this special issue, the essay critically examines the de-historicizing tendency of contemporary Confucian philosophy by arguing that attention to historical context can *enable*, rather than resist, the recognition of Confucianism as a more widely applicable or even "global" philosophy. Her argument is drawn from early twentieth century defenses of the Chinese past as relevant and vital, in the face of claims that it lacked anything more than historical value compared to the presumed timelessness and superiority of European thought and experience. These defenses, advanced by a number of young writers associated with the short-lived *National Heritage* journal based at Beijing University, turned on a sharp interrogation of the present as a reliable vantage point from which to make judgments about human history or values. According to these writers, past and present in tandem determine the future; it is therefore profoundly unwise to assume we always know what is yet to come.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude this set of essays by returning to this warning. In more

than one sense, our own historical context (however one may construe the “our”) is both unusual and unprecedented. Scholarship in global and comparative history reminds us that European dominance is not an inevitable telos, but rather an aberration (and a relatively short one at that) within the *longue durée* of a world history dominated by Asia (Clulow, 2013; Pomeranz, 2000; Wong, 1997). Part of interrogating the stability and certainty of our own present condition—including the ethnocentric intellectual confines of our own scholarly disciplines—includes enabling these global trends of the past to have influence in our present. This is yet another reason, perhaps the most important reason, that political theorists should engage Confucianism. For all we know, it may well be the future. And it should certainly inform our present, enabling us to learn more about ourselves as well as others.

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ⁱ In his review of Bai's book, for example, John Makeham notes the bizarre failure to acknowledge that such texts as the Book of Documents (*Shujing*) and Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu*)—and not necessarily just the Confucian *Analects* or its more well-known fellow-travelers such as the *Dao De Jing*—provided “models of rulership, decision-making and political legitimacy that were debated and invoked for more than two millennia.... Until just one century ago, these were among the first texts to which the student of Chinese political culture would turn” (Makeham, 2013).