

RECENT WORK

BOOK REVIEW ON ***THE PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGE FROM CHINA* (EDITED BY BRIAN BRUYA)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Philosophical Challenge from China (Bruya 2015a) aims at enriching western philosophy with Chinese thought. In the introduction, Brian Bruya laments about the lack of interest in Chinese philosophers, claiming that “a minor Western philosopher such as Anselm garners more attention in PHD programs than the entire Chinese tradition combined” (Bruya 2015b: xv). Bruya’s claim is hard to verify, but a comparison between the search results from Google Scholar for Western philosophers like Aristotle (975,000), Willard Van Orman Quine (166,000) and Anselm (183,000) to those for Chinese philosophers like Confucius (114,000), Mencius (26,200) and Zhuang Zi (19,300) signals that he has a point.¹ In order to mend this lacuna, 13 contributors were invited to discuss topics that are recognizable to philosophers working in one of the many subfields of analytic philosophy in relation to Chinese thought. According to Bruya, enriching Western philosophy can come in a number of ways. He writes: “[I]t [Chinese philosophy] would advance the current discussion (...) [by] supporting a minority view with a pervasive new argument, contradicting a prominent position, and (...) demonstrating that the issue has a significant dimension that has been neglected (...)” (Bruya 2015b: xv) The remainder of the book shows that ‘bringing the current philosophical discussion to a higher level’ should be added to Bruya’s list.

Bruya also briefly discusses a familiar worry of comparative philosophers, namely that Western categories are forced upon Chinese thought and Chinese philosophy is thereby assimilated to Western concerns. Bruya responds that the book is categorized using human issues and not particularly Western or Chinese issues (Bruya 2015b). The

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¹ Scholar.google.nl access date June 30th, 2015.

division of chapters under the headers “moral psychology”, “political philosophy and ethics” and “metaphysics and epistemology”, raises doubts whether this is indeed the case. None of the three can properly be called human issues and clearly seem to be Western categories. It is doubtful that non-western philosophers will adhere to a clear cut distinction between “moral psychology” and “ethics” (Mencius for example likely will not) or between “ethics” and “metaphysics” (Daoists likely will not). Some scholars will object to this approach but it is fairly similar to the way ancient and medieval philosophers are treated in present-day analytic philosophy. Modern Western categories are also different from ancient and medieval categories to some extent but current analytic philosophers are able to do justice to the thought of Aristotle, Aquinas or Anselm within modern categories. Although something might be lost, this approach is warranted because there is no real alternative.

2. MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

The first paper addresses psychological bias in judging one’s own character compared to judging someone else’s (Sarkissian 2015). Hagop Sarkissian cites Susan Wolf who argues that giving others the benefit of the doubt is a disposition of the moral saint. Giving other the benefit of the doubt should be understood as being charitable in judging others and refraining from blaming. Sarkissian finds a predecessor of Wolf’s ideas in Confucius’ analects. In it, Confucius holds that when explaining another’s behavior, one ought to look beyond that person’s motivations and character traits to external contextual factors that could explain her behavior. According to Confucius, judging others less harshly will have positive effects on the judging subject itself. Many psychological experiments show that people tend not to be moral saints and judge others much more harshly than they judge themselves. Nonetheless, game theory teaches us that giving others the benefit of the doubt will be beneficial in the long run and thus seems to provide support for Confucius’ claim.

David B. Wong has Mencius’ conception of moral sprouts and their developments weigh in on the Western discussion over the role of emotion and reason in virtue ethics (Wong 2015). Wong’s paper is a clear example of how Chinese thought can provide new arguments for a minority position in Western philosophy. Mencius’ ideas put the emphasis on the pre-theoretical, and thus the emotional aspects of moral life rather than on the rational aspects. From the emotional aspects, “patterns of suffering” emerge. In order to be mindful of the patterns of suffering, persons should weigh their reasons, so Mencius’ account is not wholly emotional. With his paper, Wong succeeds in bringing the debate between emotional and rational accounts of virtue ethics to a higher level by showing how Mencius’ ideas assign a role to both. Mencius’ view can still be counted among the emotional accounts but his ideas can aid in overcoming the standoff between both sides of the debate.

Bongrae Seok also discusses Mencius’ moral psychology (Seok 2015). Seok claims that Mencius’ ideas can enrich moral psychology because he takes the role of the body serious. His ideas on empathy are connected to recent scientific insights in mirror neurons and considered as an instance of care ethics. It would have been helpful to

connect his insights with the current philosophical debate over moral intuitionism but Seok convincingly shows how Chinese thought can be useful for understanding scientific advances in morality.

3. POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

The part on political philosophy and ethics is certainly the most controversial and thought-provoking of the book. Tongdong Bai critiques the views of John Rawls on ‘decent hierarchical societies’ (Bai 2015). A decent hierarchical society does not treat all persons as free and equal citizens but holds that one group or one religion can hold the upper positions of political authority. Bai opposes Rawls’ condescending tone when arguing that a liberal democracy should merely tolerate decent hierarchical societies. He argues that modern liberal democracies do not deserve the moral high ground assigned to them by Rawls. The general public suffers from political ignorance to a large extent and this is mainly because modern liberal democracies have become too large and diverse to function properly. Bai offers an alternative, Confu-China. Confu-China is a hypothetical decent consultation hierarchy based on Confucian ideas. Confu-China recognizes most basic liberties liberal democracies have, but differs on the role of the state (the state is responsible for the well-being of the people). A more radical change in Confu-China is the organization of elections; elections in Confu-China abandon the ‘one man one vote’-system and opt for a competence-based system. Bai thus does not give new arguments for a minority view in Western philosophy; he rather gives arguments for a non-existing view in current Western political philosophy. This can only help to make the philosophical discussion even broader.

Donald Munro follows a similar line of reasoning when arguing for unequal moral worth (Munro 2015). He surveys the history of the western idea of equality from Plato to Rawls and contrasts it to the *Analects* of Confucius. According to Munro, the Confucian tradition asserts that filiality is the basis of virtue. The result is that family members have more value to an individual than outsiders. Modern psychology suggests that people indeed feel closer ties towards their kin than towards others. According to Munro, there is no real alternative for grounding moral judgments than in emotions, so modern psychology vindicates the Confucian position. Munro thus also gives arguments for a view that is virtually non-existing in Western moral philosophy.

Stephen Angle takes a more conciliatory approach than the previous two articles and paves the way for a dialogue between Aristotelian/ Humean virtue ethics and Mou Zongsan’s views on self-restriction (Angle 2015). Mou argued that individual should restrict their ethical judgment to make political and legal authority possible. According to Angle, the idea of self-restriction can help in overcoming problems in Aristotle’s and Hume’s account of virtue ethics. The problem is that both Aristotle and Hume agree that virtues should be cultivated by individuals and are thus to a large extent particular. Both also share the idea that laws of states are universal and hence there is a conflict between both. When particular virtues are restricted in the political realm, the problem can be overcome. Angle’s article raises a lot of issues, like when is self-

restriction appropriate and when not, but shows that Chinese thought can help in overcoming long-standing problems in Western philosophy.

Kong-loi Shun discusses ethical self-commitment by considering the Confucian understanding of *yi* (Shun 2015). In later Confucian thought, *yi* means distancing oneself from situations that can be ethically tainting and correcting such situations when they arrive. *Yi* puts the focus on the self rather than on others in ethical situations. Shun thoroughly elaborates on how *yi* can be relevant for thinking about morality but his article misses an engagement with the philosophical discussion on this subject. It would have been interesting to let the idea weigh in on Western virtue ethics or moral character building.

Owen Flanagan and Steven Geisz's paper discusses an important question in current metaethics, namely the question how to ground morality (Flanagan and Geisz 2015). Western metaethics has long struggled to ground morality without invoking a transcendent, personal God who created the moral law. A number of authors like Charles Taylor and Alasdair Macintyre even argued that such a project is doomed to fail. Flanagan and Geisz claim that classical Confucianism is a clear example of a serious moral tradition without any foundation in a God. Flanagan and Geisz argue that the whole debate over the need for God in Western metaethics arises out of the particular history of the West. Without settling the debate, their paper shows the importance of historical contingent factors in some philosophical debates. These factors are often neglected in analytic philosophy.

4. METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

The final part may be less controversial but also highlights some major differences between Western and Chinese thought. Philip Ivanhoe discusses views of Chinese neo-Confucian thinkers about oneness (Ivanhoe 2015). In the West, some medieval mystics wrote about feelings of oneness but the theme is largely absent from Western philosophy. In Chinese philosophy oneness plays a much more prominent role. Ivanhoe discusses several senses of oneness. He believes oneness can be useful for understanding empathy and altruism. Considering the self as an expanded self can do a much better job of explaining these phenomena than the traditional Western atomized conception of the self. Ivanhoe does not develop his view of the expanded self much further. This would probably have been another challenge to Western philosophy.

Brook Ziporyn mounts an all-out attack on one of the central elements of traditional Western logic, namely the law of non-contradiction (Ziporyn 2015). Whereas most philosophers in the West take the law of non-contradiction as an unavoidable starting point or a basic truth, it enjoys no such status in the East. Many Buddhist schools of thought explicitly deny the law of non-contradiction. Very recently, Western philosophers like Graham Priest have taken up their ideas. Whereas Priest's discussion was largely limited to the Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate truths, Ziporyn focus on one Chinese Buddhist school, the *Tian-Tai*, which expanded on epistemological ideas of Zhuang Zi. Although the subject matter is complex, Ziporyn succeeds in tilting the discussion to a higher level than that of

Graham Priest and provides a powerful challenge to the predominance of the law of non-contradiction.

Another defense of a minority view with new Chinese arguments is Stephen Hetherington and Karyn Lai's defense of prioritizing knowing-how over knowing-that (Hetherington and Lai 2015). The priority of knowing-that over knowing-how was already criticized by Gilbert Ryle in the 1940s. Hetherington and Lai agree that knowing-how cannot be reduced to knowing-that and expand knowing-how to include knowing-to; a way of knowing aimed at a certain goal, for example knowing how to choose the right words for calming a group. For this purpose, they use a Chinese text, the *Lü-Shi-Chun-Qiu*, as a resource. In their conclusion, Hetherington and Lai voice the hope that Western epistemology can be expanded to include a richer concept of knowing.

Of all the contributions to the volume, Bo Mou's constructive engagement between Willard Van Orman Quine's naturalized epistemology and Zhuang Zi's Daoist naturalism (Mou 2015) devotes most time to the question whether a dialogue between East and West is possible. He claims that before we can have a constructive engagement, we first need clarity about what kind of naturalism we are talking about. When we understand naturalism as liberal naturalism, which allows for some nonscientific and non-physical aspects of nature, a bridge can be built. With this bridge in place, Quine's naturalized epistemology can be enriched by Zhuang Zi on the issue of naturalism and normativity and on the relationship of philosophical inquiry to science.

Brian Bruya discusses the relevance of Xun Zi and Zhuang Zi for the philosophical discussion of action without agency (Bruya 2015c). The discussion rose to prominence by the works of Harry Frankfurt who argued that humans are only responsible for their actions if they know their reasons for action. Others have pointed out that people often engage in actions in an unreflective automatic way and are thus unable to give reasons for these actions. Yet we often hold people responsible for these actions. Bruya argues that Chinese philosophers do not face the same issues because they view natural human action as an ideal and natural human action is often unreflective and automatic. Bruya suggests that both views can be combined in a unified theory of human action. However, it is hard to see what the unified theory would look like since both positions are very different and Bruya does not give this unified theory.

5. SUMMARY

The philosophical challenge from China shows that Western philosophy can certainly be enriched and often challenged by Chinese thought. The quality of the papers ranges from good to excellent. Readers who expect general information about Chinese philosophers will be disappointed but this was never a goal of the book. The book can be of interest to philosophers in many subfields and to anyone who is open to non-Western ideas.

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