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STUDYING CONFUCIAN AND
COMPARATIVE ETHICS:
METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

In my article, I sketch some methodological reflections that have evolved in the course of my own study of Confucian and comparative ethics. To provide a context for these reflections, I will start by referring back to three methodological observations in my *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*.¹ First, I drew a distinction between two goals in the study of early Chinese thought—that between understanding the perspective of an early Chinese thinker and drawing out its implications for contemporary practical and philosophical concerns. To keep these goals separate, I embarked on a three-volume project in my own study of Confucian thought, the first two being directed to textual studies and the third to a philosophical discussion.² Second, while acknowledging that Confucian thinkers are guided primarily by practical concerns, I proposed that textual studies can still contribute to our understanding of their perspectives, though they might need to be supplemented by relevant ethical experiences, imagination, and sympathy for the Confucian ideal.³ And third, in relation to the use of Western philosophical terms, I proposed to avoid their use in a study directed to understanding the perspectives of early Chinese thinkers, while leaving it open that the use of such terms might have a place in other kinds of study with different goals.⁴

While still endorsing these observations, continued reflections have led to further refinements and elaborations. In relation to the first observation, I was thinking of a distinction between two goals and two related kinds of activities. In seeking to approximate the ideas recorded in a text, we should be engaged in textual and historical analysis, and whether the ideas are philosophically appealing to us from a contemporary perspective should not affect the process. On the other hand, in developing the ideas in a way that is philosophically appealing to ourselves, we are no longer constrained by textual and

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historical considerations, and are instead guided by criteria of excellence pertaining to this philosophical exercise. While still regarding this distinction as an important one, it now appears to me that there is a third kind of activity that lies between and bridges the two. Namely, having engaged in textual and historical analysis, we might still need to look to the text with an eye to extracting the insights behind the text that link up with our own contemporary concerns and interests. That is, unlike the first kind of activity which looks primarily to the past and the second kind of activity which looks primarily to the present, there is a third kind of activity that looks both ways and that facilitates the transition from the first to the second.⁵

In relation to the second observation about the practical concerns of Confucian thinkers, it now appears to me that, while we may characterize them as ethical thinkers and teachers, the sense in which they think about and teach ethics is very different from the way this is done in a contemporary academic setting. For example, as we can see from the record of his sayings, Confucius' attention is directed primarily to specific individuals, including rulers and officials, as well as his students and other close associates. Confucian thought subsequently evolved in a more general direction, leading to more general discussions about such topics as *xing* 性, or human nature. Still, even when expounding on the human condition in general terms, most major Confucian thinkers continued to direct attention to specific situations involving specific individuals they encounter in their daily life, in a way often reflected in their more general discourse. For example, Zhu Xi's sayings and writings often refer back to the experiences of himself, his students, and his close associates, whether in court or in personal life, and Wang Yangming's sayings likewise refer back to his own political and military experiences. This is understandable as most major Confucian thinkers up to the nineteenth century had been in public office and their ethical thinking was linked in intimate ways to their own life experiences. For this reason, in our attempt to extract insights from the teachings of Confucian thinkers, it is often useful to think back to these experiences of theirs and to relate them to our own life experiences. The third kind of activity I just described will need to incorporate this exercise so as to get at some of the core insights of Confucian thought.

Finally, in relation to the third observation about the use of Western philosophical terms, this relates to broader methodological issues in comparative studies of Chinese and Western ethical traditions. If we survey the contemporary literature in comparative ethics, we see various attempts to deploy Western philosophical frameworks in the study of Confucian thought, and it will be useful to think more reflectively about the point of this exercise. Also, while we see frequent

deployment of Western philosophical frameworks in the study of Chinese thought, we rarely encounter the reverse phenomenon, namely, the deployment of Chinese philosophical frameworks in the study of Western thought. And, interestingly, this is true also of the literature published in the Chinese language.⁶ This asymmetrical tendency in the study of comparative ethics is puzzling, and further investigation is needed to understand its possible grounding.

In the following discussion, I will elaborate further on the three kinds of activities just described, and consider how thinking to the ethical experiences of the Confucian thinkers and of ourselves should play a role in the third kind of activity. I then survey the different approaches found in the contemporary literature on comparative ethics, and discuss the use of Western philosophical frameworks as well as the asymmetrical tendency just described. For convenience, I will label the three kinds of activities “textual analysis,” “philosophical construction,” and “articulation.” These activities are distinguished by their different goals, the different forms they take, and the different criteria by which they are assessed. As I will be spelling out these differences in detail, the labels we use to refer to them should not by themselves carry any significance. However, in choosing these labels, I did deliberately avoid the more common terms “interpretation” and “reconstruction.” The reason is to avoid inadvertently generating any confusion due to the fact that these two terms have been used in different ways in the literature, referring sometimes to one and sometimes to the other of these three kinds of activities, and sometimes to a combination of them.

These three kinds of activities are not intended to be exhaustive of what one might do when studying Chinese and comparative thought; there are other kinds of activities guided by other goals some of which I will describe later. Furthermore, the distinction between them is a conceptual one in that, while the three related goals can in principle be separated, they are in practice often combined in a single study. In drawing this distinction, I am not proposing that they should always be separated in the study of Chinese thought; whether and to what extent one does so is more a matter of personal choice. The point of introducing the distinction is rather that, even when the three kinds of activities are combined in a single study, it is useful to distinguish between them so as to correctly understand what one might be seeking to accomplish and to properly assess the study.

II. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

To understand the nature of *textual analysis*, let us simplify discussion by considering an early Chinese text whose ideas can without contro-

versy be ascribed to a single thinker. The activity of textual analysis includes at least three components. First, we might undertake what may be called syntactical and semantic analysis, studying such aspects of the text as syntactical structure or the connotations of key terms. Such study will need to be supplemented by historical analysis; for example, analysis of the connotations of a key term would need to be supplemented by an investigation into the intellectual climate of the times.⁷

Second, on the assumption that the ideas in the text are ascribable to a single thinker, we might seek to give an account of the ideas in the text as a whole, relating the different parts of the text and maybe also relating the text to other texts recording ideas of the same thinker. In doing so, we work with certain assumptions such as some degree of coherence among ideas in different parts of the text, though whether such assumptions are reasonable would depend on other considerations. For example, even if the text is not layered with different parts coming from different sources, the ideas it records might still represent the thoughts of the thinker at different stages of his life with potential changes over the time period represented in the text.

Third, we might seek to understand the perspective of the thinker going beyond the ideas recorded in the text, such as the experiences and concerns reflected in what he had said or written, or what he was trying to accomplish. For example, we may conclude that what Mencius said to a ruler of a state was a rhetorical device to steer the ruler to a certain way of looking at things, or that Xunzi was deliberating redefining *xing* 性 for certain purposes. To arrive at these conclusions, we would need to look beyond a particular text, and take into account the practical and intellectual concerns of the times as reflected in the larger corpus of texts from that period.

While there are different components to the activity of textual analysis, they share some common characteristics. First, they are all directed to approximating something given in history, whether these are the syntactical and semantic aspects of a text written or compiled in the past, or ideas of a historical thinker as recorded in the text, or the concerns and experiences ascribable to this past thinker. Second, the notion of evidence, based on linguistic and historical analysis, plays an important role in this task and in resolving disagreement on the outcomes. Although the evidence might not be sufficient to yield definitive conclusions on certain issues, that there is evidence we can work with provides reason to expect a significant degree of convergence in our conclusions. Third, as the goal is to approximate something given in history, our attention is directed *maximally* to the text and to what the text tells us about the past, and only *minimally* to the present concerns and conceptions of ourselves. While we do unavoid-

ably take a present standpoint in looking at the past, we at the same time seek to minimize the influence of our present standpoint on the task at hand.

In making this third point, I take the following position regarding the study of an early text. While in any study of a historical phenomenon we inevitably look at the past from our present standpoint, we can still draw a distinction between the past facts and our present concerns and conceptions, and we can make conscious efforts to minimize the influence of our present concerns and conceptions on our understanding of the past. Also, although our presentation of the outcome of investigation will be in a contemporary language and will be different from the way the early thinker would present his ideas, this inevitable use of a contemporary language and its associated conceptual frameworks does not eliminate an important distinction, that between ideas present in the early text and ideas attributable to ourselves. What it implies is only that the best we can do is to *approximate* the ideas in the text, not that there are no such ideas distinct from our own concerns and conceptions.

To clarify further, we should note that the above observations do not commit us to the idea of a standpoint outside of the present or outside of history.⁸ The point is only that, while we inevitably view the past from our present standpoint, there can be different extents to which we can bracket our own present perspectives in viewing the past, and that in textual analysis we seek to do so as much as possible. Also, the above observations do not commit us to the idea of an “objectively valid interpretation” of a text.⁹ All we are committed to is that evidence matters in the textual analysis of a text, that it can help resolve disagreements, and that as a result there is reason to expect a significance degree of convergence in our conclusions. This is compatible with the observation made earlier that, not infrequently, the evidence might not be sufficient for us to draw definite conclusions on certain issues, and often our conclusions have to be phrased in terms of an overall balance of evidence.

Having added these clarifications, I hope it is no longer controversial whether textual analysis is a possible or legitimate kind of activity. We are familiar with this kind of activity in our present circumstances. For example, if someone sends me a written note, I can—mirroring the three components of the activity just described—provide a syntactical and semantic analysis of what has been written, build an account of the ideas contained in that piece of writing as a whole and, utilizing other information about the author, come to conclusions about what concerns led the author to write the note and what he or she is seeking to accomplish. In doing so, I focus on the piece of writing and its author, and bracket as much as possible any influence

from my own preconceptions. If this is a possible kind of activity in our present circumstances, there is no reason why it cannot also be a possible kind of activity in relation to something written or compiled in the past. There is, admittedly, a difference—the amount of evidence we have or can unravel diminishes over time, and so the kind of evidence that gives us access to the past is usually by comparison much more limited. But it does not follow from this limitation that it is not a possible or legitimate activity to seek to *approximate* what is in the past on the basis of the limited evidence we have.

I have defended the possibility of this kind of activity at some length because some recent discussions related to hermeneutics might seem to suggest that the very *possibility* of this kind of activity is at issue. My impression, though, is that the disagreement is in actuality not about the possibility or legitimacy of this kind of activity, but is in part a terminological issue about what constitutes “interpretation” of a text or the “meaning” of a text, and in part a more substantive issue about what kind of activity one should focus on when approaching a text.¹⁰ As long as textual analysis is a possible kind of activity, it will be useful to distinguish it from other kinds of activity with different goals.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL CONSTRUCTION

By contrast to textual analysis, philosophical construction takes some insights from a text as a starting point, and builds a philosophical account on that basis; here, I am using “philosophical account” in a general sense to refer to an account that is relatively reflective in relation to its subject matter.¹¹ To make the discussion more specific, let us narrow our attention to the study of Confucian ethics, which will allow us to introduce a reference to the notion of ethical experience. In philosophical construction, having extracted some insights from a Confucian text, we seek to build a philosophical account that we regard as an appealing and defensible understanding of certain aspects of our own ethical experiences. Unlike textual analysis, the focus is on what we, from our present perspective, regard as appealing; not only is the exercise conducted from a present standpoint, but our attention is directed to the present. The link to the text is *minimal* since, other than building on the insights already extracted from the text, we no longer seek to approximate ideas in the text, and we may freely deviate from the way these insights are elaborated on in the text. Instead, the attention is directed *maximally* to the present—the goal is to build an account that relates to present concerns, and we allow our present concerns and conceptions to freely shape the way the account evolves.

Another difference from textual analysis is that, in the case of philosophical construction, the notion of evidence is less applicable. Instead, the exercise is guided by criteria of assessment that may combine various considerations, depending on what one seeks to accomplish. There are at least three related but distinguishable variables in this connection. First, our emphasis may be more on relating the account to certain ethical experiences and concerns of ourselves and of others whom we see as the audience, or it may be more on fitting ideas from Confucian thought into certain philosophical frameworks we have chosen to work with, such as fitting ideas from Confucian thought into the notion of “virtue ethics” or into some Kantian framework. Second, our mode of thinking may focus more on specific concrete situations that we have ourselves encountered as part of our own life experiences, or it may proceed in a more general and abstract fashion. And third, the primary audience we address may be a general audience inclusive of any educated individual sharing our ethical concerns, or an audience that comprise members of a philosophical community defined more narrowly, such as Anglo-American moral philosophers.

These variables are obviously related—an investigator trying to fit ideas in Confucian thought into some Western philosophical framework will likely be thinking about the subject matter in more abstract terms and seeing the audience as primarily members of a philosophical community. At the same time, the contrasting considerations in each variable may be combined in different ways in a single study—for example, in his discourse, Zhu Xi is both thinking to the concrete ethical experiences of himself and his close associates, and trying to fit his elaboration of Confucian thought into philosophical frameworks of his times such as the distinction between *li* 理 and *qi* 氣. Despite the complex ways in which these variables may come together, distinguishing between them helps us determine what criteria may be appropriate in assessing an attempt at philosophical construction. For example, an account directed to helping us make sense of certain aspects of our actual ethical experiences can be assessed in terms of how deeply it goes in probing the nature and grounding of such experiences, while an account directed to a philosophical community and attempting to fit ideas from Confucian thought into some contemporary philosophical framework can be assessed in terms of the criteria of excellence characteristic of that community.

It follows from this variety of considerations and the associated criteria of assessment that, unlike textual analysis, there is little reason to expect convergence in philosophical construction, even if different investigators start with the same core insight in a text. While philosophical construction is less commonly seen in the contemporary

studies of Chinese thought, it is still important to highlight it as a distinct kind of activity.¹² To the extent that a historical movement in Chinese thought does have a contemporary relevance, we should be able to build a philosophical account that draws on insights of the movement and is appealing and defensible on its own grounds without essential dependence on reference to its source in that historical movement.¹³

IV. ARTICULATION

Philosophical construction takes as its starting point certain insights that we extract from early texts—but how do we extract such insights? In textual analysis, we seek to approximate what is recorded in the texts, but the insights behind the texts might not lie on the surface and their extraction might take additional effort. And, to the extent that these insights are of relevance to us, such effort would need to relate also to our own ethical experiences. Thus, it appears that we need a third kind of activity that looks both ways, both toward the text and the latent insights from the past, and toward ourselves and our own present concerns and experiences.

The conception of a process of this kind is found in the teachings of a number of later Confucian thinkers in the context of discussing the way to read the Confucian classics. They assume that there are certain insights of the “sages” that might not be explicit but might lie behind the ideas recorded in the classics—these insights are referred to as the sages’ *yi* 意, or thoughts. The most important task in reading the classics is to go beyond the analysis of these texts so as to come to grips with such insights. For example, Zhu Xi acknowledges the importance of a close study of classical texts, of a nature that is akin to what I have called textual analysis.¹⁴ This, however, is only preparatory to our eventually extracting from them the insights of the sages.¹⁵ To do so, we need to relate what we obtain from the classics to our own personal experiences, and to actually practice and embody them in our daily lives.¹⁶ So, the process involves interplay between our present experiences and the past insights of the sages, with the assumption that these insights are as relevant to the present as they were to the past. Since these insights are unchanging in their relevance, the process is like that of listening to the ancient sages through the classics, and we should empty our mind of any pre-conceptions so that we can accurately hear the voices of the sages.¹⁷

Even if we might not agree with this last point about insights of unchanging relevance and about listening to the voices of the sages, the idea of a two-way process, involving our moving back and forth

between what is recorded in a text and our own experiences, as a way of extracting certain insights from the text that are of relevance nowadays seems an intelligible one. Eventually, we might develop these insights in directions that go beyond or even deviate from what is originally in the text. But before engaging in the exercise of philosophical construction, this two-way process helps us come to grips with these insights.

For want of a better term, I will label this process “articulation” as it exhibits some similarity to the kind of processes we commonly refer to with this term. Consider, for example, the process of articulating certain thoughts I have. In doing so, I start with some thoughts that are not clearly expressed and whose content may also be not fully clear to myself. As I give expression to them, not only their expression, but also their content, becomes clearer. So, during the process, what I started with is itself changed in the process—the content of my starting thoughts has become more fully fleshed out and has gained greater clarity. Thus, while there is something I started with in the first place, my participation in the process makes a difference to the outcome.

This kind of process is familiar to us in the context of working out an initially promising philosophical idea. The idea is usually not fully clear and fully developed to start with, and there is an open-endedness in the way it can be eventually fleshed out. In developing this idea, my own philosophical inclinations, such as what I regard as a philosophically appealing way of developing the idea, makes a difference to the process and to its outcome, and yet that outcome is still an elaboration of something I started with.

A similar kind of process takes place not just in relation to my own thoughts and ideas. I can, for example, attempt to articulate the spirit and rationale behind an institutional setup, such as the university tenure system. In doing so, I might introduce considerations such as academic freedom and creativity, institutionalized ways of nurturing young scholars, and so forth. There is something I started with, namely an institutional setup whose content is accessible by others, and yet my own ideas and conceptions make a difference to the outcome as I attempt to spell out the spirit behind the setup in a way that makes best sense to me. What makes best sense to one might differ from individual to individual, and so the outcome of the process may vary from individual to individual.

In speaking of articulating the insights in an early text, I have in mind a similar process. Taking the ideas recorded in a text as a starting point, we seek to determine certain insights in the text that both reflect the ethical experiences of the thinker from the past and are of relevance to us in our present circumstances. In doing so, we look to

both the thinker and his life history and experiences, and ourselves with our present concerns and experiences. While our starting point is something given—the text and the ideas recorded in the text, the thinker and what we know of his life history and experiences—our own present concerns and experiences make a difference to the way we spell out the insights that lie behind the text. Furthermore, our own philosophical conceptions may also affect the outcome. For example, Zhu Xi, in extracting what he believes to be the sages' insights behind the classics, is not just thinking of the ethical experiences of himself and his close associates, but is also working with philosophical frameworks and trends prevalent during his time. In the process, although the outcome is limited to some extent by the starting point, the starting point is sufficiently open-ended that the extracted insights can be developed in different ways by different investigators with different concerns and conceptions. Accordingly, while the starting point gives reason not to expect a radical divergence in the outcome, the role played by our present concerns and conceptions in the process also gives no reason to expect significant convergence.

This process assumes that there are indeed insights that can be extracted from the text and that are of relevance nowadays. That there are insights of this kind may be explained in terms of certain ethical experiences shared by both the Confucian thinkers and ourselves, and that there are such common experiences may be explained in different ways—that the investigator's contemporary experiences have been shaped to some extent by Confucian teachings, or that there are certain experiences shared broadly by human beings in relation to which any ethical tradition of significance will have something to contribute. It may turn out, of course, that there are no insights of this kind, and that the process does not yield fruitful outcome. This can happen in other attempts at articulation—my attempt to develop an initially promising philosophical idea may lead me to the conclusion that this idea has no genuine substance. Thus, the process involves an element of initial judgment and faith in the promise of the starting point, while leaving it open that such judgment may turn out to be unsubstantiated.¹⁸

To further elaborate on the process, let us consider its relation to the other two kinds of activities. Articulation is like philosophical construction in that both seek to relate what they do to our own present concerns and conceptions. The difference is that, while articulation seeks to extract from the text insights of relevance to us, philosophical construction seeks to build a philosophical account on the basis of the extracted insights. Accordingly, articulation by comparison still stays close to the text. It is more an exercise of imagination and sensitivity, involving a sympathetic attitude toward the text and a

patient probing of its ideas, with the goal of coming up with some new insights that deepen our understanding of our own ethical experiences or enable us to see them under a fresh perspective. Philosophical construction, by contrast, takes such insights as its starting point, and the emphasis is more on fleshing out these ideas and fully spelling out their nuances and implications. While the resulting account is still related to the text through these starting ideas, the process can develop the ideas in a way that goes significantly beyond or even deviates from the text.

Articulation is like textual analysis in that both seek to relate what they do to the text, and take seriously both the ideas recorded in the text and the historical context within which the thinker's ideas evolved. However, unlike textual analysis which involves our bracketing as much as possible our own concerns and conceptions, articulation allows the investigator's concerns and conceptions to influence the process. It still pays significant attention to the text because of the judgment and faith that it contains underlying insights of relevance to us. But it also looks toward ourselves since what we regard as genuine insights and our formulation of these insights are a function of what we believe will potentially deepen our understanding of our own ethical experiences.

Just as articulation grounds philosophical construction by providing the core ideas on which to build a philosophical account, textual analysis grounds articulation by providing an understanding of the text that constitutes the starting point for probing the underlying insights. Viewing their relation from the other direction, there is also a sense in which articulation anchors textual analysis and philosophical construction anchors articulation. When we engage in textual analysis, there is no limit to what we can take as our focus, and viewing it as a preparatory task for articulation helps to give it a focus. The dimensions of our ethical experiences that engage our attention relate only to certain aspects of the text but not to others, and so the choice of what to focus on in textual analysis can itself be a function of those dimensions of our ethical experiences that we are interested in. At the same time, if the insights extracted from the text are genuine insights of relevance to our own ethical experiences, they should be capable of being developed and fleshed out in their own right, without referring back in an essential way to the historical context within which they emerged. Thus, philosophical construction also anchors articulation in that the possibility of developing a philosophically appealing account on the basis of the extracted insights ensures that what have been extracted through articulation are genuine insights.

While textual analysis focuses on the past and philosophical construction on the present, articulation looks both ways and involves

interplay between a text from the past and our present concerns and conceptions. Given the close relation between articulation and the other two kinds of activities, we may expect it to be often combined to some extent with textual analysis and philosophical construction. Still, these are distinguishable activities—the imaginative moving back and forth between the past and the present is a recognizably different kind of activity from either the close textual study that emphasizes linguistic, textual and historical evidence, or the philosophizing that emphasizes qualities such as analytic rigor, clarity, and precision. Not seeing articulation as a recognizably different kind of activity from textual analysis may lead to a potential danger. One may be tempted to conflate articulation with textual analysis and mistakenly ascribe ideas that result from the articulation process to the text. But, to the extent that our own concerns and conceptions are allowed to play a substantive role in shaping these ideas, the resulting ideas already go beyond what is recorded in the text in a way that is not supported by the linguistic, textual, and historical evidence. Being conscious of the distinction between the two kinds of activities is particularly important as there is only a fine line between ideas actually present in a text and ideas that are further development of ideas in the text.

Not viewing articulation as a distinct process may lead us to see it just as a combination of the two other kinds of activities, and this also has its dangers. If we take this view, then it is tempting to segment the ideas that result from the articulation process into those that are ascribable to the text and those that are attributable to ourselves. But doing so will miss the point of articulation as a distinct kind of activity. For example, consider Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Mencius* 《孟子》. Not seeing articulation as a distinct kind of activity, it is tempting for us to first identify the elements of Zhu Xi's commentary that "get Mencius right" in the sense that we could have arrived at the same conclusions by independent textual analysis, and then ascribe the other elements entirely to Zhu Xi's own thinking and view them as unrelated to the *Mencius*. Doing so, however, prevents us from doing justice to the distinctive kind of activity Zhu Xi was engaged in, which involves moving back and forth imaginatively between the text of the *Mencius* and his own present concerns and conceptions.

One observation that has sometimes been made in certain kinds of study of Chinese thought is that there is no distinction between ideas pertaining to a text and ideas attributable to the investigator. This observation could be making the point just described, namely, it might not be useful to draw such a distinction in the context of the articulation process.¹⁹ However, the observation makes a useful point only in such a context, and it does not follow from this point that there is no such distinction to be drawn. To deny the distinction as such is to

deny the possibility of the other two kinds of activities, which I have argued to be both possible and legitimate. Indeed, recognizing the importance of the two other kinds of activities helps to ensure that articulation is not an arbitrary process, not one in which anything goes.²⁰ On the one hand, it should be anchored in proper textual analysis to ensure that the final outcome retains a significant degree of linkage to the original text and does not do violence to it. While one may develop the ideas extracted from the text in a way that goes beyond the text or even deviate from it, such development has to be largely consistent with the text, and any deviation is but a modification of some core idea that stays intact. One should also maintain a clear awareness of what might or might not properly be ascribed to the text on the basis of textual analysis, to avoid the danger of ascribing to it ideas that come from the investigator's own preconceptions. On the other hand, the outcome of articulation should also potentially provide the basis for the activity of philosophical construction. It should be something that one can flesh out in substantive terms, and ideally should resonate with our own ethical experiences and deepen our understanding of them or add a fresh perspective. To ensure that the ideas extracted through the articulation process have genuine substance, we should be able to flesh them out in substantive terms, without constantly having to refer back to their textual source.²¹

V. COMPARATIVE ETHICS

As we build on certain core ideas from Confucian thought and work toward an account of our own ethical life that is of appeal to us, it is often useful to also draw on ideas and insights from other ethical traditions. I will refer to as "comparative ethics" any study that in some way brings together two different ethical traditions. In this broad sense, comparative ethics can include attempts to bring together ethical traditions that have had historical interactions, as part of an investigation into the historical influences on a certain movement of thought. This would be true of studies of, for example, the mutual influence between Confucian and Daoist thought or of the influence of Zhuangzi's thinking on Xunzi. This kind of historical study is part of the task of textual analysis, and I will not be concerned with studies of this kind. Instead, I will focus attention on attempts to bring together ethical traditions that have had minimal or no historical interaction till present times. Such a comparative study is often directed toward the goal of helping us understand one or both of the two ethical traditions, as well as deepening our understanding of certain aspects of our own ethical experiences. It assumes that there is

a substantive overlap between the concerns of the two traditions involved, and that some of these common ethical experiences are sufficiently broadly shared to warrant our speaking of them as aspects of *our* ethical experiences. This assumption can again be explained in different ways—that our contemporary experiences have been shaped to some extent by both traditions, or that there are certain experiences shared broadly by human beings in relation to which any ethical tradition of significance will have something to contribute.

Comparative studies take different forms, and some of them relate directly to one or the other of the three kinds of activity described earlier. Consider, for example, textual analysis, which is directed to approximating the ideas recorded in a text. In the literature, there is a kind of comparative study that engages in explicit and direct comparison of thinkers, texts, movements, concepts, or themes from two different traditions, with a similar goal of helping us understand the perspective of one or the other of the two traditions. Examples include comparative studies of Confucius and Aristotle, Confucian and Kantian ethics, the Confucian notion of *chi* 恥 and the contemporary Western notion of shame, or the Confucian and contemporary Western perspectives on the relation between self and society. Often, such a comparative study involves a discussion of similarities and differences between traditions, though it may also go beyond such a discussion. This kind of *direct* comparative study can help our understanding of the Confucian ethical tradition by alerting us to certain of its features that might have otherwise eluded our attention, and by setting them within a broader perspective. For example, comparing Western conceptions of shame and the Chinese notion of *chi* can highlight certain features of the latter that distinguish it from the former. Unlike the Western counterparts, *chi* is associated with the sense of being tainted and the urge to cleanse oneself of the stain, rather than with the sense of being exposed and the urge to hide oneself. These features of *chi* can be spelled out in non-comparative terms and their presence can be determined by textual analysis, and so in principle a comparative study is not needed for us to identify these features. However, in practice, a comparative study often plays a catalytic role by alerting us to these features, and also helps to set them within a broader perspective.²²

Or consider philosophical construction, which is directed to building an account of our ethical life that engages our own experiences and is of appeal to us. Though not as commonly found in the literature, there can be a kind of study that discusses issues in ethics in a way that draws on insights from two different ethical traditions, though without necessarily mentioning, or with only incidental references to, these two traditions. For example, considering how the basis of individual

claims and entitlements, or the grounding of filial obligations, are viewed in Confucian thought and in certain Anglo-American traditions allows us to develop an account of these subject matters in a way that draws on the insights from both traditions. In doing so, one might not have made any direct reference to these two traditions, though one might have included footnote references to acknowledge the sources of one's ideas. This kind of *indirect* comparative study contributes to the same goal that philosophical construction does; it draws on and integrates the insights of two ethical traditions in an attempt to construct an account of our own ethical life that is of appeal to us.

Thus, both textual analysis and philosophical construction can benefit from comparative studies and, to the extent that articulation is an activity that bridges these two other kinds of activities, it can similarly benefit. Looking to ideas and insights from other traditions not only can help us notice the presence of certain insights in Confucian thought, but it can also shape our formulation of these insights by incorporating ideas from other traditions that we find appealing. So far, I have described two kinds of comparative studies, one direct and the other indirect, both of which treat the two ethical traditions involved in a symmetrical fashion. In the literature, however, there has also emerged a trend that treats Chinese and Western traditions asymmetrically, as illustrated by the following examples.

First, one may adopt some Western philosophical framework in discussing a Chinese tradition. Examples include the use of a Kantian framework in the study of Confucian thought, or the discussion of Confucian ethics as a form of virtue ethics. Second, one may make reference to some Western philosophical framework but, rather than adopting it to frame one's discussion, one instead raises the question whether the Western framework is applicable. Examples include discussions about whether Mozi is a utilitarian, or whether Zhuangzi is a relativist or a skeptic. Third, one may pose similar questions in relation to the applicability of certain Western philosophical concepts rather than frameworks. Examples include discussions of whether the Confucians have a conception of rights or of the self.

Some other approaches focus on philosophical questions and issues rather than on concepts and frameworks. The fourth focuses on certain questions raised in Western philosophical discussions, and considers how Chinese thinkers would view and address such questions. Examples include discussions of whether Confucian thinkers have a conception of weakness of will, and if so how they would understand such a phenomenon. The fifth approach also focuses on certain questions raised in Western philosophical discussion, but instead of just considering how Chinese thinkers might view the rel-

evant questions differently, also attempts to address the questions in a way that draws on the insight of Chinese thought. Examples include the attempt to draw inspiration from Confucian thought in developing an account of the basis of legitimate claims and entitlements that, unlike certain other Western discussions of the notion of rights, focuses on the idea of community.

In addition to these approaches which focus on frameworks, concepts, or issues discussed in the Western philosophical literature, there are also attempts to situate Chinese thought using broad Western philosophical categories. The sixth approach involves fitting various aspects of Chinese thought into such categories as “epistemology,” “metaphysics,” and “ethics”; examples include a number of histories of Chinese thought written in Chinese in the past century. The seventh approach takes the further step of raising the more fundamental question whether Chinese thought can be described as “philosophy,” or whether there is a legitimate sense in which we can speak of “Chinese philosophy” as a subject of study. Such discussions are found in both Chinese and English language discussions, and more recently takes the form of a discussion in China of the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy.”

The above sketch is obviously not exhaustive of the different approaches found in the literature, but it helps illustrate the variety of comparative studies that have emerged in the past few decades. It also illustrates a noteworthy observation about such studies, namely, the obvious asymmetry in the way in which Chinese and Western philosophical traditions are brought together. As we can see from the above examples, 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. This trend is seen not only in works published in the English language, but also in those published in Chinese.²³ 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. Given that Chinese ethical traditions are no less rich in insights and resources compared to Western ethical traditions, or at least many of us would so believe, this asymmetry is deeply puzzling, and I will devote the rest of the article to a discussion of this phenomenon.

VI. A PERPLEXING ASYMMETRY

In speaking of an asymmetry in comparative studies, I am referring not to individual studies taken singly, but to a collective phenomenon,

a phenomenon that becomes conspicuous when we view comparative studies collectively. Each individual investigator inevitably works against the background of a life history that shapes the investigator's perspective on and approach to the subject of study, and it is not possible to speak of asymmetry in connection with the work of a single investigator. Take, for example, the present study which is a discussion of Chinese thought conducted in the English language. The idea of asymmetry does not arise in this connection, but it would arise if, viewing all related studies collectively, it were noticed that there is a conspicuously greater tendency to use the English language in the study of Chinese thought compared to the use of the Chinese language in the study of Western thought.²⁴ Also, even if we do notice an asymmetry when viewing studies in a certain area collectively, the phenomenon need not be perplexing as it could be explained in terms of factors extrinsic to the objects of study. For example, even if it has turned out that, at a certain point in time, there is a conspicuously greater tendency to conduct studies of Chinese thought in English compared to studies of Western thought in Chinese, this could have been explained in terms of factors such as the comparatively lesser exposure of Chinese speaking communities to Western philosophical thought at that point in time, factors that have to do with historical considerations rather than with the content of Chinese or Western philosophical thought. If the asymmetry in comparative studies were due just to such historical factors, then the asymmetry would not have been perplexing. My suspicion, though, is that there is more behind the asymmetry.

Let us consider a couple of attempts to explain this asymmetry in terms of extrinsic considerations. One possible consideration has to do with *access*, namely, making one tradition of thought intelligible and accessible to an audience who works primarily in another tradition. One might present Chinese thought using more familiar Western terms to make it accessible to a Western audience, or vice versa. In the history of China, we witness such endeavors with the introduction of Buddhism and of Christianity into China, where ideas from these other traditions were presented using more familiar Chinese terms to make them accessible to a native Chinese audience. Debates about how to translate certain key terms, whether from Chinese to English or vice versa, might have related in part to access. Also, the framing of Chinese thought in terms of broad categories such as "metaphysics" and "ethics" might also have to do with making Chinese thought accessible either to a Western philosophical audience or to a Chinese audience who prefers to view Chinese thought through these Western categories.

Another consideration has to do with what might be called *institutional fit*, namely, how the study of a certain tradition of thought might

fit into an institutional context. Examples include discussions of whether Chinese thought should be more broadly represented in North American philosophy departments and in professional meetings, as well as deliberations about the place of Chinese thought in the undergraduate curriculum and in graduate programs in philosophy. Similar questions can be raised about how the study of traditional Chinese thought might fit into the departmental setup in Chinese universities. Debates about whether there is such a subject as Chinese philosophy or about the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” might have in part been driven by these considerations.

While these considerations might have been at work in discussions in some circles, they cannot fully explain the asymmetrical tendency under consideration. For example, the tendency to study Chinese thought using Western philosophical frameworks that is found in Chinese language publications could not have been explained in terms of access, nor is it set in the context of institutional deliberations. Even for similar studies in the English language, scholars engaged in such studies likely see their work not just in terms of access or institutional fit, but as making a substantive contribution to the objects of study. Thus, it seems more likely that the asymmetrical tendency has to do with certain views about the objects of study, certain sentiments that approaching Chinese thought using Western philosophical frameworks has a certain intellectual value that studies from the other direction might not have.

Consider some of the examples in the literature. We see engaged discussions of such questions as whether Mozi is a utilitarian, but not whether John Stuart Mill is a Moist or endorses *jianai* 兼愛. We find debates about whether traditional Chinese thought has a conception of rights but not whether Western traditions have a conception of *li* 理. And, more recently, we see debates about whether Confucian ethics is a form of virtue ethics but not about whether Aristotelian ethics is a form of *lixue* 理學. In these examples, it is unlikely that the asymmetrical tendency is due to considerations of access or institutional fit. Rather, it appears that there is some sentiment that a certain significance attaches to the questions framed in one direction but not to those framed in the reverse direction.

So, it appears that this asymmetrical tendency can be traced to certain views about the differences between the nature of Chinese and Western thought. Let us therefore consider some attempts to justify the asymmetry in these terms. Some have claimed that deploying Western philosophical frameworks in studying traditional Chinese thought is unavoidable if we are to make progress with such studies in the “contemporary world.”²⁵ Perhaps the thought is that, to the extent we are using a contemporary language in such studies, it is impossible

to avoid the contemporary perspectives built into the language, which are often informed by Western conceptual frameworks. But understood in this way, this claim does not justify the asymmetrical tendency since, at least to the extent that we are using modern Chinese in our study, the contemporary perspectives built into the language are also informed by Chinese conceptual frameworks. Furthermore, whether using modern Chinese or a contemporary Western language, any conceptual framework embedded in such a language falls far short of the rich philosophical vocabulary used in comparative studies.

Another possible suggestion is that the asymmetrical tendency stems from an asymmetry between Western and Chinese philosophical concepts. Concepts like utilitarianism, rights, or virtue ethics have a universal application, not in a sense that prejudices whether they represent correct approaches to ethics, but in the sense that their contents are intelligible independently of the philosophical traditions in which they are rooted. By contrast, Chinese philosophical concepts are primarily historical in that their contents are intelligible only in relation to the traditions in which they are rooted.²⁶ For example, utilitarianism as an ethical theory can be explained without reference to John Stuart Mill or any other specific philosopher, while Moism as a school of thought can only be made intelligible in relation to the thinking of Mozi.

This line of thinking assumes that Western philosophical concepts indeed have a universal application that transcends their historical origin, of a kind that is absent from Chinese philosophical concepts. Whether the former do have this kind of ahistorical universality is itself a matter of debate.²⁷ Even if we bracket this complication, if we are to pursue this line of thought, we should compare the Western concepts with appropriate Chinese counterparts. Consider, then, concepts such as *jianai* 兼愛, *li* 理, or *lixue* 理學—it is not clear that these concepts are more “historical” and less “universal” than Western concepts such as utilitarianism, rights, or virtue ethics. Just like the Western counterparts, the content of each can be spelled out in general terms, without an essential reference to specific Chinese thinkers. There appears no reason for thinking that Western philosophical concepts have a universal application of a kind that is absent from their Chinese counterparts.

There can be other lines of thought that attempt to justify the asymmetry. For example, some might hold the view that Western concepts and frameworks are in some sense more “systematic” than the Chinese counterparts, and so using the former to approach Chinese thought can help to “systematize” the latter, but not vice versa. I will not attempt an exhaustive discussion of the potential

intellectual grounding of the asymmetrical tendency. Instead, I will approach the issue from a different direction, by focusing on the question about the *point* of using Western philosophical concepts in studying Chinese thought. Once we can ascertain the point of doing so, we can raise a similar question about studying Western thought using Chinese philosophical concepts. Whether the asymmetrical tendency is intellectually grounded will then depend on whether there is an answer to the former question not available to the latter.

As far as intellectual grounding is concerned, those who deploy Western concepts in studying Chinese thought probably see this kind of study as deepening our understanding of certain aspects of Chinese thought or of our own ethical experiences. Though the terms employed have their roots in Western traditions whose nature is quite different from Chinese traditions, their use is presumably not intended to carry connotations specific to the historical context within which the related Western traditions evolved. Even if they might have retained such connotations, one can still filter out such connotations to ensure that the terms have a “universal” application of the kind described earlier.

If we take this approach, the terms will have an intelligibility that is independent of the historical contexts within which the related Western traditions evolved. Accordingly, their content should be something we can spell out using more ordinary and accessible language, and the substance of this kind of study should be something that can be expressed without essential dependence on the use of these terms. Whatever substance there is to the claim that Mozi is or is not a utilitarian, that Zhuangzi is or is not a relativist, that Confucian ethics is or is not a form of virtue ethics, or that Chinese thought is or is not philosophy, that substance should be something that can be spelled out clearly and in detail, without essential dependence on the use of the terms “utilitarianism,” “relativism,” “virtue ethics,” or “philosophy.” Once that substance has been spelled out, whether the related philosophical terms apply becomes a purely terminological issue and does not add to the substance of the discussion.

This does not mean that the use of the Western philosophical terms does not have any significance to begin with. Using these terms in discussing Chinese thought helps direct our attention to certain phenomena that are associated with the use of the terms. While the way these phenomena are conceptualized and viewed in Chinese traditions will likely differ from the way they are conceptualized and viewed in Western traditions, the use of these terms does help direct our attention to the related phenomena in Chinese thought. After having investigated the Chinese perspective on these phenomena, whether the Western terms apply becomes immaterial; but prior to

that investigation, the use of such terms does help direct attention to the object of investigation.²⁸

On this account, the point of using Western philosophical terms in the study of Chinese thought is a “second order” one—the point is not to determine whether or how these terms apply, but to direct our attention to the investigation of the Chinese perspective on certain kinds of phenomena. Though the use of these terms serves this “second order” function, it does follow from this account that, ultimately, our attention should not be overly focused on the applicability of these terms.²⁹ On this account, after initially framing our questions using the Western philosophical terms, the substance of the discussion should no longer depend essentially on the use of the terms. There have been a number of illuminating studies that I believe take this direction.³⁰ If this account is correct, a way to ascertain the real substance to a study that approaches Chinese thought using Western philosophical concepts is to ensure that the content of the discussion can be formulated without essential dependence on the use of the related Western terms.

On this account, though, it does seem to follow that there is no intellectual grounding to the asymmetrical tendency described earlier. There appears no reason why Chinese concepts do not likewise direct our attention to certain phenomena of such a nature that it would be a worthwhile project to also investigate the related phenomena—how they are conceptualized and viewed—in Western philosophical traditions. Consider the notions *li* 禮, *jing* 敬, *xu* 虛, and *cheng* 誠, to just mention a few examples. These terms refer to certain aspects of our ethical life highlighted in Confucian thought, and while related phenomena are also discussed in the Western philosophical literature, using such terms as “ritual,” “etiquette,” “reverence,” “purity,” “integrity,” or “sincerity,” they are either relatively little explored in Western philosophical discussions (e.g., ritual, etiquette), or treated in a manner quite different from Chinese traditions (e.g., integrity, sincerity). There is no obvious reason why it is of less significance to view Western ethical traditions against the background of these concepts, compared to the approach in the reverse direction.

There might be other possible proposals about how to ground the asymmetrical tendency under consideration, and my point is more to direct attention to this tendency and hopefully stimulate some discussion of its possible intellectual grounding. Given that such an asymmetrical tendency is indeed conspicuous in the literature, I think we will have to either provide it with an intellectual grounding, or else acknowledge that there is no such grounding and that the tendency is just a collective phenomenon explainable in terms of historical trends that wax and wane over time. While I am not able to fully defend my

view in this article, I am inclined to the latter position. As some of the recent works have demonstrated, approaching Chinese ethical thought using Western philosophical concepts can indeed help bring out certain features of Confucian thought related to ethical issues discussed in Western philosophical traditions, and may even lead to novel and illuminating ways of approaching these issues. At the same time, Chinese ethical traditions themselves have rich insights into the ethical experiences of human beings that are conveyed through concepts distinctive of these traditions. Viewing Chinese thought from the perspective of Western philosophical conceptions will not do full justice to these insights. It is by studying Chinese ethical thought on its own terms that we can bring out its more distinctive ideas, which can then be fleshed out and developed without being shaped by agendas set by Western philosophical discussions. This is the task of philosophical construction that I described earlier, a task that will help bring out the contemporary relevance and distinctive contributions of Chinese ethical thought.

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ENDNOTES

In my work on this article, I have benefited from conversations or correspondences with Roger T. Ames, Joseph Chan, Cheng Chung-yi, Chung-ying Cheng, Chad Hansen, Christoph Harbsmeier, Doil Kim, Joel Kupperman, Liu Xiaogan, and David B. Wong. I discussed related methodological issues in presentations at the International Symposium on Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München, October 1–3, 2007), International Conference on Contemporary Perspectives on Traditional Chinese Ethics (National Taiwan University, Taipei, May 15–17, 2008), International Conference on Virtue: East and West (Chinese University of Hong Kong, May 20–22, 2008), International Conference on New Directions in Chinese Philosophy (Chinese University of Hong Kong, May 18–21, 2009). I also presented related ideas in a graduate seminar I taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the spring term of 2008, and have benefited from discussions with the participants.

1. *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
2. *Ibid.*, vii.
3. *Ibid.*, 7–9.
4. *Ibid.*, 11–12.
5. In thinking about this third kind of activity, I have been helped by discussions with Roger T. Ames and Cheng Chung-yi.
6. A phenomenon noted by Liu Xiaogan in his “*Fan Xiang Ge Yi yu Zhong Guo Zhe Xue Yan Jiu de Kun Jing* 反向格義與中國哲學研究的困境,” *Zhongguo Zhexue yu Wenhua* 《中國哲學與文化》 (The Journal of Chinese Philosophy and Culture) 1 (2007): 10–36. I have been helped by this article in thinking about the asymmetrical tendency in the study of comparative ethics.
7. An example of such study is A. C. Graham’s analysis of *xing* 性 and *qing* 情 in “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” *Qinghua Xuebao* 《清華學報》 (Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies) 6, nos. 1 & 2 (1967): 215–71. Reprinted in

- idem, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 7–66.
8. Contrary to what is suggested in Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 51, 224.
 9. A notion highlighted in E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
 10. For example, Palmer thinks that the kind of activity I have described is more a matter of “analysis” and should not be equated with “interpretation;” the proper task of “interpretation” should seek to relate the past to the present (*ibid.*, 7–10, 226). By contrast, Hirsch regards this kind of activity as the proper task of “interpretation,” and the attempt to relate the past to the present as pertaining to the task of “criticism” (*ibid.*, 139–44). However, Palmer does acknowledge that what he calls “analysis” is a legitimate task (*ibid.*, 68), and that different tasks are suited for different purposes (*ibid.*, 59) and for answering different questions (*ibid.*, 66). Likewise, Hirsch also acknowledges that what he calls “criticism” is suited to a different goal, and that people can differ regarding which goals they emphasize (*ibid.*, 139–44).
 11. The distinction between textual analysis and philosophical construction is close to the distinction between historical reconstruction and philosophical reconstruction in Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, eds. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49–75. Rorty makes a similar point about convergence in relation to what he calls historical reconstruction.
 12. Examples of such works in Western philosophy include Peter F. Strawson’s work on Kant and Jonathan Bennett’s work on the British Empiricists, both cited in Rorty, *ibid.* There are other examples in which the relation to the historical thinker maybe even more distant, such as certain philosophical attempts to develop Humean accounts of causation. In relation to Chinese thought, David B. Wong’s attempts to draw on insights from Confucian thought to develop an account of the grounding of individual claims and entitlements is probably closest to the kind of activity I have in mind. See David B. Wong, “Rights and Community in Confucianism,” in Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31–48. In “Ideal Motivations and Reflective Understanding,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1996), 91–104, I myself drew on certain core ideas in early Confucian thought and developed an account on that basis without making any reference to the sources of these ideas. David S. Nivison, in private correspondence, pointed out rightly that the article was, despite appearances, a discussion of a central problem in Mencius’s thinking.
 13. A conversation with Chad Hansen some years ago partly helped stimulate my thinking on this point.
 14. Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei* 《朱子語類》, 8 volumes (Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 185, 193.
 15. *Ibid.*, 162.
 16. *Ibid.*, 161, 165, 176, 181.
 17. *Ibid.*, 177, 179, 180, 185, 186. For a clear and helpful discussion of Zhu Xi’s views on reading the classics, see Shao Dongfang “*Zhuzi Dushu Jiejing zhi Quanshixue Fenxi* 朱子讀書解經之詮釋學分析” (The Hermeneutics of Zhu Xi’s Works: A Comparative Study with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutics), in *Zhuzixue de Kaizhan—Xueshu Pian* 《朱子學的開展—學術篇》 (The Unfolding of Zhuzi’s Learning: His Scholarship) (Taipei: Center for Chinese Studies, 2002), 69–94.
 18. In highlighting this point, I am indebted to a comment by Chad Hansen when an earlier version of the article was presented at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.
 19. I have been helped by separate conversations with Roger T. Ames and Cheng Chung-yi in noting this point.
 20. I am indebted to Liu Xiaogan who pointed out the need to emphasize this point.
 21. Putting in a different way this linkage to textual analysis and to philosophical construction, someone engaged in the process of articulation should be prepared to speak to philologists as philologist and to philosophers as philosopher, taking seriously both the textual basis and the philosophical substance of the outcome of the process.

22. In my own discussion of *chi* in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 58–63, I was guided in part by thinking about the difference between *chi* and Western conceptions of shame, though without explicitly engaging in a comparative discussion.
23. See Xiaogan, *Fan Xiang Ge Yi*, for a discussion of this trend in Chinese language publications.
24. In adding this clarification of the idea of asymmetry, I was prompted by a comment by Liang Tao when an earlier version of the article was presented in at the National University of Taiwan.
25. See Peng Guoxiang, “*Zhong Guo Zhe Xue Yan Jiu Fang Fa Lun de Zai Fan Si* 中國哲學研究方法論的再反思,” in *Nanjing Daxue Xuebao* 《南京大學學報》 44, no. 4 (2007): 77–87.
26. In formulating this possible proposal, I have been helped by Chiu Wai Wai in discussions in a graduate seminar.
27. See some of the essays in Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner, *Philosophy in History*.
28. For this reason, although I myself have up to this point of my research avoided the use of Western philosophical terms in approaching the study of Chinese thought, I am not opposed to the use of such terms as such as long as the substance of the discussion can eventually be spelled out in a way that does not depend essentially on their use.
29. I illustrate this approach in my “Concepts of the Person in Early Confucian Thought,” in Shun and Wong, *Confucian Ethics*, 183–99. In that article, I argue that the substantive issues to the debates about whether Confucian thinkers have a conception of self or of rights have to do with certain phenomena related to the use of these terms, and with how the Confucian thinkers view such phenomena. Once we are clear on the Confucian view on the related phenomena, whether we say that the related terms apply becomes a terminological decision.
30. One example is David S. Nivison’s “Weakness of Will in Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” in David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism* (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 1996), 79–90. Although Nivison uses the term “weakness of will” in framing his discussion, it is clear from the way his discussion proceeds that he is highlighting a contrast between the Confucian and certain Western views on a range of phenomena related to the use of this term, where such phenomena and the different views on them can be expressed without essentially depending on the use of that term. Another example is David B. Wong’s “Rights and Community in Confucianism” (see n. 14). Though Wong introduces his topic of investigation using the notion of rights, his conclusion has to do with a certain account of how individual claims and entitlements can be grounded, a conclusion that can be expressed without depending essentially on the use of the term “rights.”