Front. Hist. China 2017, 12(2): 155–180
DOI 10.3868/s020-006-017-0011-8

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Conflict, Order, Harmony: The Modern Meaning of the Confucian Tradition

Abstract An examination of how a focus on the reading of traditional Confucian texts as a spiritual exercise can enable us to deal productively with modern understandings of the divergences among different ideals of human excellence. An investigation of such ideals has often focused on virtue discourse, but that discourse generates understandable suspicions in many people. A productive approach to these suspicions is to examine both the idea that new virtues (such as spiritual regret) are needed, and the notion that three distinctive modern emphases must play a central role in any contemporary consideration of the relationships among diverse ideals. After considering two kinds of principled opposition to this approach, we turn to Walter Benjamin's exemplary account of the huge gulf between modern and traditional understandings, and the possible aid some texts may offer in bridging it. Focusing on the distinctive operation of specific forms of presentation in the Confucian tradition, we conclude by investigating the idea that reading Confucian texts can be seen even today as an illuminating kind of spiritual exercise.

Keywords Confucian, Walter Benjamin, virtue, spiritual exercise

Introduction

Divergences and conflicts among apparent human goods have often been recognized. Nevertheless, the notion that such apparent goods are truly legitimate is far from prominent in those parts of either the Western or Chinese tradition with which I am familiar. Even less prominent is the notion that such goods are tempting although unfamiliar or even alien, are goods that can and even should attract people. In fact, in almost all traditional civilizations it seems a central claim, one that underlies many other claims, is that there is a single goal or good. More

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precisely put, the claim is that there is either a *single* form of human excellence or a *harmony* among somewhat different forms. The latter notion, the idea of harmony, figures prominently in Confucianism's universalizing claim, and that helps explain the continuing prominence of a passage about seeking harmony, not uniformity or conformity, that appears in *Lunyu* 13.23 (君子和而不同，小人同而不和 The superior man seeks harmony, but not conformity; the small man seeks conformity, but not harmony).

The search for universalism is related to a discussion of virtue; virtue discourse is a traditional and often productive venue for such an inquiry. It is also, however, one whose peculiar use today demands some comment both on traditional ideas about virtue and on the idea that new virtues may be needed in modern times. The concern here, then, is not on how we ought to produce and evaluate public policies that deal with diverse goods, except in so far as working out many of those issues may rely on working out ideas about virtue. The concern here is the ways in which a language that relies on ideas about virtues, old and new, helps us either to face or to think about foreign but tempting goods, as well as to understand the contribution Confucianism can make.[1]

Ideas about virtue generate understandable suspicions in many people. There are however rich traditions in many civilizations, including China, that have argued that a language of virtue provides the best way to talk about crucial features of our lives. Virtues in all these civilizations are human excellences, aspects of what we call character. Put more abstractly, they are those characteristic patterns of feeling

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[1] There are, of course, complicated historical tales about the specific forms taken by this claim about a single good or goal, and they reveal much about differences among religious traditions and cultures: Confucians and Buddhists, for example, usually saw each other differently than did Christians and Jews. Moreover, explanations can rightly differ as to why people saw competing religious goods as inadequate; political or economic factors surely played a large role in some cases. Of special interest here and very relevant to Confucianism is the term, harmony (*he*). The classical locus may be *Lunyu* 13.23 ("harmony not uniformity or conformity" *he er bu tong*), but interpretations of it abound and other texts are relevant; see, for example, 1.12 where harmonization is declared the most precious of the functions of *li* and the beautiful way of the sage kings. Further, extensive treatments of the notion and evocations of its importance predate those passages, and the tradition continues to turn over and debate those texts. Of particular importance to any theoretical interpretation is the story from the *Zuo Commentary* that links harmonizing to cooking soup—and also making music. There are, of course, other Chinese words that refer to harmony; see Chenyang Li, "The Ideal of Harmony," and Alan Chan, "Harmony as a Contested Metaphor," as well as for treatments on related but more philosophical matters. Thanks are due to many, but I would like to give special thanks to Professors Wang Ban, Tanvir Ahmet, Justina Torrance, and the anonymous reviewers.

and motivation that reflect a life plan the fulfillment of which is thought to be all-important.[2]

A standard defense of the significance of virtue theory rests on controversial but, to my mind, compelling ideas: that we often are strangers to ourselves and that we find it exceedingly difficult to think well, using just everyday language, about those things that matter most to us. This may be especially true if that language is deeply informed by versions of a cost-benefit model that treats values as commodities we can approach and even trade, as we do material commodities. Nuanced language about virtues helps us to deal with these problems. It enables people to understand themselves and their varied relationships in fuller and more subtle ways than they otherwise could, and therefore also to live better lives.

However, if we switch perspectives and think in terms of *other* people's perceptions, a perplexing feature of this enterprise appears. If virtues are understood as those admirable characteristics that a significant number of people in a society think reflect instances of human excellences, substantial problems arise for any argument that people need to manifest *new virtues* when they face what the diversity of integral goods implies. The problem is that the new virtues will not seem to many observers to represent human excellences; some may even consider them deficiencies or vices. This basic problem informs any discussion and presentation of new kinds of human excellences, probably especially in a case like that presented by the virtues embedded in traditional Confucian ideas.

A productive avenue into these issues is to begin with two related matters: a consideration of the roles three modern ideas play in any contemporary consideration of the relationship among diverse goods and an examination of a new virtue those ideals imply, the virtue of spiritual regret. The perspective that emerges from these inquiries is controversial enough that we must consider two kinds of principled opposition to it. Further, an understanding of that perspective's possible cogency can be enhanced by examining the different but illuminating fashion in which Walter Benjamin considers the gulf between modern and traditional understandings and the ways we may be able to bridge it. Benjamin's depiction displays both the severity of the problems the gulf presents and the possible aid some kinds of texts may offer. It is an account that helps us to see how

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[2] On this subject, see Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas* and Lee Yearley, "Virtues and Religious Virtues in the Confucian Tradition"; each is available in a Chinese translation. Also see Martha Nussbaum, "Comparing Virtues," a response to *Mencius and Aquinas* and my response to her. For a more theoretical development of my ideas in this area, see Lee Yearley, "Conflicts among Ideals of Human Flourishing," and Lee Yearley, "Virtue Ethics in Ancient China." Those accounts owe much to Stuart Hampshire's, *Innocence and Experience*, but fundamentally differ from it on the role of religious goods.

traditional texts, especially traditional Confucian texts, may enable us to deal more productively with the relationships among ideas of conflict, order, and harmony. Let us begin with an examination of each of the three modern ideas that impinge on any contemporary understanding of virtue.

The Character and Effect of Three Modern Emphases

The needed new discussion of human excellences involves centrally an attempt to think out the implications of *three* specifically modern emphases or themes. One is autonomy, and a second is the valuing of both introspection and retrospection, notions that together combine to generate the modern concern with integrity. The third is a new grasp of the ways human diversity displays the contingency of our affirmations. These three do appear in traditional accounts, either in somewhat different forms or in different configurations with other excellences, but they become prominent in new ways only in modern times. Nonetheless, any mention of "the modern," even one that affirms the links to traditional accounts, can legitimately become subject to a barrage of questions, or at least quizzical glances. Many of these responses will, I hope, be ameliorated by the following analysis, and especially the treatment of Walter Benjamin's exemplary consideration of the differentiating features contained in the idea of the modern.

Any comment by a Westerner about the modern runs, of course, the risk of making universal claims about a set of ideas that arise from a particular, limited tradition and are given their most sharply defined and influential form in a specific period in that tradition. (I mean by "the Western tradition" that peculiar amalgamation of four distinct streams that make up at least a significant part of the modern world for many people, whatever their geographic location: currents from the worlds of the Greco-Roman, the Ancient Near East, the Enlightenment, and those contemporary movements that sit, if uneasily, within the category of "postmodernity.") Employing the notion of autonomy could even be said to provide a paradigmatic example of such a risk. Nonetheless, we find in both Chinese and Western civilizations distinctive modern forms of all three notions, each of which both relates to and differs from its traditional roots.

First is an emphasis on the significance of *autonomy*. It rests on an affirmation of the importance of having chosen (in the weak sense of that word) either to be a person of a certain sort or to affirm consciously that you choose to be as you have been determined to be by various external forces. Put simply, moderns want to be able to say, "It is my life." Put more technically, they believe that a person should have and value a second-order disposition that informs all first-order dispositions and makes them distinctively one's own. This emphasis may seem, especially in its more traditional forms, to find far a more congenial home in the West than in

Confucianism, but we find a distinctive form of it even in early Confucianism, with its continuing concern with semblances of virtue and the village honest person [*xiang-yuan*], e.g., *Mengzi*, 7B37.

Second is a valuing of that understanding of self that arises from *introspection* and *retrospection*, from reflecting upon one's present self and society as well as their histories. This means people and their societies should feel obligated to grasp who they are and what they have been. That in turn leads to an emphasis on the importance of two attitudes that spawn practices with extremely significant theoretical implications, "accuracy" and "sincerity," to use the categories of a recent, influential philosophical account.[3] (An argument can be made that Confucianism manifests these matters more clearly, in both its traditional and modern forms, than does any Western tradition.)

These notions are important in themselves, but put together they also underlie a crucial modern presumption: that the "integrity" or even "authenticity" (a word that has suffered mightily from some of those who cherish it) of an individual is of crucial value. That, in turn, generates the modern concern with hypocrisy or self-deception. Whatever may be the problems associated with these ideas—problems that can be substantial—features of this perspective remain compelling to most people, and for good reasons. Possessing integrity can, for example, rightly be called a virtue or excellence that ranks with being just or benevolent. I would argue that a subtle notion of integrity may have a more central place in traditional Confucian civilization than it does in traditional Christian civilization.

The third modern notion arises from an enlarged understanding of the diversity of possible forms of human actualization that appear in the civilizations spread throughout the world, and most important, the implications that understanding has for the subject of the *contingency* of human values. Those appear in ideas that are probably less widely shared than, say, the valuing of individual integrity. One is that all our lives are inevitably embedded in specific cultures and are shaped by commitments that are *underdetermined* by the reasons that support them. This means we live in ways that we cannot fully justify by the reasons that we have for living that way. This notion rests in turn on the recognition that our way of life is only one among many, and that contingent factors shaped which one it is.

All three of these basic ideas reinforce the notion that people cannot legitimately appeal to authoritative supports that they might well have invoked before modern

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[3] On the significance of accuracy and sincerity, see Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 84–148. That book also contains an especially subtle treatment of "authenticity" (175–205), and its analysis of the place of the notion of contingency informs my own account. For the Western background of all these ideas, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

times. That, in turn, means that people should be conscious of the presence of real conflicts about the best way to live. Accepting that notion is, however, always a very difficult thing to do, or at least to do consistently. The difficulty arises from several disquieting notions. One is that many legitimate goods exist. Another is that whatever goods you do pursue are but one among many defensible sets of goods. A last is that your decisions and pursuits depend on many factors outside your control or even understanding.

The acceptance of these ideas poses a specific problem for people who wish to be autonomous and reflective about themselves, and that problem produces a situation that points up the need for new virtues. Put simply, the desire to possess integrity and yet also to accept the implications of what we have just discussed leads to the recognition that new kinds of virtue are of critical significance. These new virtues are informed by two distinct realizations. The first occurs when people realize fully that they can affirm only one among the different kinds of human excellence that could be affirmed, the second when they realize that the reasons underlying their affirmations can never be fully authoritative. I understand, for instance, that in my necessarily lopsided walk to the grave I can never systematically combine impartial judiciousness with family loyalty, or revolutionary commitment with ordinary decency. Moreover, I also grasp how my inclinations toward and choices among such commitments manifest not just contingent but also often opaque forces.

An exemplary instance may clarify these abstract ideas, and the example of the new virtue of *spiritual regret* provides it. Let us then examine it before turning to consider the principled opponents of the proposed perspective. A note is in order, however, on the use here of the word “spiritual.” Contemporary uses are often jejune or vapid, but we can draw on the frayed remnants of a venerable academic tradition in which “spiritual” refers to states that rise above the trivial and transient to connect with certain elemental features of human life. Especially important are those features that bear on the human desire both to be free from much ordinary woe and to face extraordinary woe well.

The Example of the New Virtue of Spiritual Regret

Spiritual regret, like all new virtues, has the character it does for several reasons. Most important here is that all such virtues must arise—and spiritual regret exemplifies this—from a state where pleasure and sorrow, delight and sadness interact. We will begin with an abstract treatment of this interaction and then move into a more concrete account of how the contours of spiritual regret illustrate this state.

At the center of any understanding of virtues is the idea that to encounter a real good is to be drawn by it, to find it attractive, and thus to enjoy it. Enjoyment becomes, then, the mark of having recognized a good. This delight remains even if that good must also remain finally unavailable because of another good, a situation that must produce sadness. In the instance of spiritual regret, the one good is the integrity of the self that encounters another real good. That integrity precludes a full adoption of the encountered good, a situation that must produce sorrow. This means that people must both encounter goods that draw them and encounter the good of their own integrity, knowing that their integrity makes impossible a full acceptance of some goods that draw them. This inevitably produces both pleasure and sorrow. To feel only sorrow would signal that one has not fully encountered the good, but to feel only pleasure would signal a failure to encounter fully the good of one's own integrity.

The concrete contours of spiritual regret illustrate in a paradigmatic fashion the state just described in more abstract terms. It arises when a person recognizes several related matters. One is that various legitimate ideals of human flourishing exist, but conflicts among them mean that no single person can come close to exhibiting all of them (ascetic purity and erotic engagement with a specific person inevitably clash). Moreover, those ideals that someone can pursue or possess are largely determined by forces either beyond that person's immediate control or beyond any person's complete control (the draw of either such purity or such engagement depends in many ways on temporal, cultural, and probably biological forces that a person is made by and does not make). Further and more psychologically complicated, people may be intensely attracted to ideals that they may not want adopted by those whom they most love. The idea of ascetic purity may move some people intensely, and yet their child's possible pursuit of it can generate the deepest misgivings.

These recognitions produce a virtue, not simply an emotional reaction or passing thought or attitude. Some legitimate uses of the word "regret" do refer to such passing phenomena. But here it refers to a virtue of which only one aspect can be the presence of a specific emotion—or more accurately, the propensity to feel an emotion in appropriate ways in specific situations. It possesses all the typical characteristics of virtue: it is, for instance, part of a person's character, and it manifests a general picture of what a person thinks a good life is.

Most illuminating here, spiritual regret, like all virtues, has two specific features. It is *corrective* of a corresponding human weakness, in this case the tendency to overlook the challenge produced by the presence of other integral and even

tempting goods. It is also *new* in that it both responds to challenges that were not fully understood before and develops capacities that were previously undeveloped.[4]

What spiritual regret *corrects* most generally is the human propensity to overlook differences among legitimate goods. It corrects the inclination to subsume different goods under one's own, or to deny that different goods are really goods. More specifically, spiritual regret corrects the common human unwillingness to face fully what a plurality of goods involves. It thus also corrects the propensity underlying most kinds of idolatry or envy: the propensity to see diverse spiritual goods only in one's own image or to feel antipathy toward goods that one does not possess. The virtue deals, therefore, with the need to face fundamentally different ideals or goods fully. It also corrects the weaknesses present in basically flawed or overly simple ways of conceiving and responding to differences. The idea of correction clarifies much, then, about how and why this kind of human excellence operates.

The notion that this or any virtue can be *new* requires a different sort of explanation, or even defense, given the following apparent problem: Everyone would agree that in order to identify a virtue, a formal structure must stay steady enough to allow people to recognize that a virtue's various manifestations belong within the same broad category. (More controversial is the extension of this noncontroversial claim to the notion that ideas about virtue only make sense when coupled with ideas about a constant human nature, all of whose capacities are evident at any time.) The idea of "newness" implies, however, that specific historical and cultural complexes, marked by distinctive chronological features, are or can be relevant to the identification of a virtue and may even determine it.[5]

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[4] Features of spiritual regret are treated, if in a different context, in Lee Yearley, "Conflicts among Ideals of Human Flourishing," 244–48; the treatment of emotions that underlies this account is developed in Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas*, 96–98, 101–5; for virtues as corrective see 16–17, 114–16. The idea that virtues have a corrective character helps us specify the relative importance of different virtues because their status will depend on the significance of the problem they correct. Virtues like spiritual regret surely do not correct difficulties as significant as those corrected by justice or perhaps courage. Nevertheless, they do correct very important difficulties, and that correction can be crucial to the operation of virtues like justice or courage.

[5] The notion that virtues can be expanded and have semblances helps us understand crucial features of the general idea of new virtues; see Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas*, 17–23, 67–72, 124–31, 139–41. Attention to new vices also helps to clarify the idea. For example, sentimentality—a deformation of spiritual regret—is a new vice; it surely was present in some form previously, but its viciousness appears clearly only when spiritual regret is seen as a virtue.

The crucial notion is then that virtues can be seen as excellences at one age or period while at another they will not be so identified. Indeed, they will be seen as indifferent qualities or even thought to be vices. The notion's validity seems most evident when we deal with the history of individuals. Innocence differs in important ways for a five-year-old, a thirty-year-old, and a fifty-year-old. An attitude toward unfamiliar people or events that is appropriate and even charming in a five-year-old is suspect in a thirty-year-old and positively problematic in a fifty-year-old.

Moreover, we see a roughly similar phenomenon in civilizations. Courage in Homer, Aristotle, and Aquinas—to use an especially clear example from the West—is still courage because an identifiable structure is there. But courage's paradigmatic manifestations have changed from a warrior's defeat of a dangerous enemy to a saint's acceptance of death in martyrdom. (A comparable example appears in China—think of the implications the commentary tradition draws from Mengzi's treatment in 2A2 of courage.) The primary instances of courageous dispositions and actions have changed; they are fundamentally different than they were. This means a new, important, and for some people crucial attribute of human goodness has surfaced.

A similar situation occurs, in my view, with new virtues like spiritual regret. They respond to modern concerns in ways that lead to novel understandings and thereby manifest new kinds of human excellence. Not everyone, of course, agrees with this view: they address in different ways the question of whether full societal and human flourishing demands an approach like the one recommended here. We need, therefore, to consider those alternatives, not just to fill out the picture but also to highlight relevant questions and to clarify the contours of the position presented here.

The most important of these positions fit into two groups that represent well the major alternatives, even if neither always directly addresses our questions. These groups have significant spokespeople, manifest integrated perspectives, and contain complex intellectual accounts whose rationales capture many adherents. I call one *sophisticated complacency* and the other *sophisticated parochialism*.

Encountering the Principled Opposition

One group—the proponents of *sophisticated complacency*—query, deny, or even are avowedly dismissive of the significance of the issues raised here; a distinguished philosopher has, in fact, labeled them the "deniers." They share what has been called the modern ideal of the affirmation of ordinary life, embrace a hearty kind of pluralism, and are suspicious of grand claims. Almost all, moreover, adhere to some version, however updated and changed, of the basic principles propounded by the

so-called Enlightenment project, principles that underlie virtually any mature form of liberalism.

At the core of their position is a kind of reasoned complacency about the need to focus on the kinds of questions raised here. A goal, in fact, is to help people overcome their sense of the importance of such questions. Proponents aim to show people that the pursuit of these questions is usually unrewarding, unnecessary, and perhaps even destructive. They can even argue that regret ought not be part of a well-lived life, a position that illuminates much about the contours of their perspective.

This position can easily produce a banal and debilitating vision of human fulfillment. But it can also generate a formidable perspective in which a privileged place is always given to realistic practical solutions and a few basic moral issues. Moreover, it adopts a spiritual ideal of disciplined detachment from many normal human concerns in order to reach three laudable goals. The goals are to preserve social order; to protect procedural rationality; and to limit the damage that heroic ideals of human excellence produce. The position can, then, present a powerful alternative to the approach for which I have been arguing.

The second group, the proponents of *sophisticated parochialism*, includes people who would claim to be fully committed members of a specific community or even civilization, however conventionally or unconventionally they understand the notions of both commitment and community. They are very suspicious of any imaginative voyaging into the possibilities that other civilizations present, as well as those virtues, like spiritual regret, that such voyaging produces. In fact, they can think such voyaging is at best a problematic ideal and the supposed virtues it produces dangerous deformations or even significant vices. They might, for example, see spiritual regret as undermining the virtue of humility on the grounds that it attempts to encompass all possible goods and therefore to become more than human.

Of special importance for this position are the implications to be drawn from the fact of human finitude; particularly important are the limits that such finitude imposes if people are to live fully within a single group. Positions like those advocated here, it is said, undercut the only possible basis for active, invigorating participation in a community. Such participation requires that people limit the sorts of questions they entertain. It may even require that they treat the claims and practices of fundamentally different civilizations with ironic distance or cultivated neglect rather than intense attention. Proponents argue, then, for an intentional and reasoned closing off of perspectives.

Any adequate response to these principled opponents involves dealing with daunting theoretical questions and complex issues about how to operate well, perhaps even survive, in a world with striking new requirements concerning how best to understand and to judge. That kind of investigation is well beyond the

scope of this particular inquiry. But we can sketch out two general features of the rationale that underlie the perspective recommended here: One is its understanding of the impact of new kinds of self-fashioning and the other its interpretation of the demands and possibilities of our current situation.

The perspective presented here enables us, first, to grasp the new kinds of spiritual discipline and fulfillment the current situation makes possible. A special kind of *asceticism*, for instance, distinguishes inquiry into the goods of different civilizations and their relationships. Among that asceticism's many facets are the cultivation of thinking without assenting and of believing without the usual communal reinforcements. Characteristics like these appear prominently in, say, Nietzsche and the various thinkers he influenced. But they also are found in all those modern thinkers who aim to probe deeply the implications of proposed new kinds of self-fashioning.

These kinds of self-fashioning are part of a discipline, the spiritual implications of which extend far beyond scholarship as it is usually defined. They can, nonetheless, be given a coherent and even academically respectable form. Modern attempts to do so include the work of figures as diverse as Hadot, Nehamas, the late Foucault, and Benjamin, the subject of the next section. Their work, further, can help us understand why we might look in what may seem to be an unlikely place for more illumination: the contributions the Confucian tradition can make.[6]

The perspective presented here enables us, second, to meet fully both the demands and the possibilities of the current historical situation. This situation requires new responses if ideas about the value of any tradition are to meet the *criteria* of appropriateness and of credibility: appropriateness to the tradition's basic norms and credibility within the conditions modern circumstances present. That in turn generates striking new demands and opportunities to rethink—to elaborate and to emend—what we and others are committed to and why.

These criteria involve claims that help structure the many vexing debates about the viability of traditions that are especially important with a tradition like Confucianism. The most important claim is that if any tradition is to request both scholarly attention and possible allegiance, it must deal with two demands that initially may appear to be incompatible or even only to generate conflict. They are the demands of being both *credible and appropriate*; of manifesting both

[6] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, contains a lengthy and philosophically sophisticated account of self-fashioning both in general and as it appears in Nietzsche and Foucault. He also links it to much earlier ideas in the tradition starting from those that appear in Plato.

plausibility within the conditions the modern situation presents and fidelity to the tradition's basic norms.[7]

To meet the demand of being *credible* is to formulate ideas from, say, Confucian texts in a way that is credible to our common contemporary experience, a way that meets the conditions of plausibility found in an experience informed by several distinctive phenomena. One is historical consciousness and another is ideas, however contested, about the rights of all humans or, more precisely put, the peculiar obligations we have to each human being. Last is the kind of plausibility demanded by the canons of modern scientific explanation, with the social rather than the natural sciences being especially important in the case of Confucianism.

To meet the demand of *appropriateness* is to formulate Confucian ideas in a way that is appropriate to, shows appropriate fidelity toward, their meaning as judged by the most basic norms found in the most fundamental forms of the tradition. This demand can, of course, be immensely difficult to satisfy. It involves complex judgments about two vexing matters. One involves adjudicating among the different currents in a tradition. The other involves decisions about the ways the elaboration or even the emendation of apparent norms can be justified.

The two demands stand in a dialectical relationship with each other but, roughly put, credibility rests on modern theoretical considerations and appropriateness rests on historical and textual considerations. Meeting both demands involves a kind of balancing act, and it may in some cases not be possible. In the case of Confucianism it is, as we will see, possible but difficult.

Both the difficulty and the possible productiveness are clarified by a central facet of Walter Benjamin's work. It is, in fact, virtually unparalleled in the honesty and perceptiveness with which it treats the needed balanced act, and therefore we turn next to it.

Walter Benjamin: Bridging the Gulf between Modernity and Tradition

A rich mixture of conjecture, argument, observation, and poetry constitutes the work of Walter Benjamin. Some find that mix exhilarating, while others find it tiresome, but almost all acknowledge that Benjamin is among the most influential figures in the contemporary Western academy. Most significant to us, his work helps us inquire into the relationship between modern understandings and the

[7] For an excellent treatment of what is involved in the notions of the credible and appropriate see Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology*, 4–6, 89–105. The presence here of apparently very different norms, however, generates difficulties with which he does not deal; on that issue see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 160–67.

spiritual resources the Confucian tradition may offer. That remains true despite the obvious fact that Benjamin's grasp and use of Chinese materials, like that of most in his circle, is informed by two apparently contradictory characteristics: it is as fascinating and at times insightful as it is episodic and usually ill informed.[8]

Benjamin's contributions to our inquiry appear in compactly presented, often contrasting observations that are characterized by an inimitable grace, density, and provocative elusiveness. These presentations demand the kind of close attention to actual textual locutions, and their implications that is more characteristic of working with poetry than prose, much less philosophical argument. Furthermore, Benjamin sometimes relies on theoretical notions born of German debates with which he was at home but many find alien. We need, then, a charitable approach and a distinctive combination of curiosity, sympathy, and tolerance to see what of importance his work offers.

Of central importance to us is Benjamin's perspective on how we may be able to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap that cuts off people in modern times from their own past. His own work illuminates the immensity of this gap with striking clarity, as he details the differences in fundamental principles, practices, and outlooks that define the distance between our own world and past worlds. Benjamin makes painfully clear, then, the huge distances that we need to bridge if we are to appropriate anything from the past.

Moreover, and perhaps even more distinctive, he illuminates well how easy it is to succumb to the specific illnesses, some virulent, that accompany most attempts to create such bridges. Those ills manifest a range of attitudes. Some are relatively benign ones, such as a bland sentimentality about the satisfactions the past offered. Others are far more virulent. Examples of the latter include a fevered attempt to recover what people perceive to be the uncontaminated excellences of purified violence or of the cleansing rejection of the apparently alien or even challenging.[9]

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[8] These reflections on Benjamin aim at clarity and coherence but occasionally are offered in the spirit of either Benjamin's last theses on the concept of history or his exposé of the Arcades project. (The latter is a dense, even epigrammatic attempt to explain what is involved in his huge project; it was executed in order to win approval and financial support.) All the Benjamin references refer to the four volume edition of Benjamin published by Harvard; the theses, e.g., are found in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 389–411; the *expose* in vol. 3, 32–49.

[9] My approach presupposes the coherence or even evident intelligibility of his thought, but it also works from two other presuppositions: that his approach probes significant issues and that at times his apparent problems, opacity, or even incoherence arise from the depth of the issues he treats. Perhaps most important, my approach will note philosophic confusions that appear in him but will not belabor them. I proceed this way because rarely do those confusions undercut or even fundamentally affect what is of importance to us.

Understanding Benjamin's approach to the needed bridging involves tangling with some of his more challenging and complicated ideas. They include those that appear prominently in his famous (or notorious) essay on the translation of poetry, with its idea that a poem is what it will become. Versions of such ideas also appear in more initially plausible and approachable forms in other works. They examine the ways a truly significant work of literature has a life that systematically exceeds what any specific time, even the time in which it was created, understands. Using such works let us first turn to Benjamin's understanding of the gulf between tradition and modernity and then examine his account of the possible ways to bridge it.[10]

The challenge and the aid Benjamin's work presents arise from one of his major concerns, perhaps his overriding concern: how the modernity he describes in such insightful and influential ways seems to manifest the kind of break with the past that cannot be bridged. Much of his work illustrates with power and subtlety that apparently unbridgeable character, a point of great importance given our attempt to argue for the relevance of some traditional Confucian texts when they are approached in an appropriate fashion.

A prominent instance of the gulf's unbridgeable character is Benjamin's depiction of the effects of technical reproducibility, but another is his account of the way of life the Arcades (roughly what today is called "mall culture") produces. He shows how each contributes to a set of truly new attitudes, thoughts, and actions. Behind both analyses are his detailed examinations of the eclipse of the aura (a term of art for him) and what it represents. That examination portrays what today is called the dissolution of notions of the sacred and their accompanying rituals. Benjamin often, then, sharply depicts the destruction of one world and the construction of another.

Perhaps in no place is this depiction more strikingly and provocatively evident than in his drawing out the implications of an apparently simple linguistic distinction. Benjamin distinguishes sharply between *isolated experiences* and *long experience*. It is a difference the German language makes both evident and congenial: the first is designated by the German word *Erlebnis*; the second by the

[10] Benjamin insists that a poem is what it will become in significant part because "both the original and the translation [are] recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel." He examines that idea in a dazzling and provocative way in the essay on the translation of poetry, but that examination depends on some notions that are dubious enough, or at least controversial enough, to warrant caution and the turn to other works of his. The quote is from Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 260; note 253–63, especially 258.

German word *Erfahrung*. (The former is always made plural in my account and is translated as experiences or, at times, isolated experiences; the latter is almost always made singular and translated as experience or occasionally long experience.)

This simple linguistic distinction enables Benjamin to make a *major theoretical point* about two matters: the *general* character of life and the *distinction* between traditional and modern modes of operating in the world. Experiences are what occur in the flow of everyday life. Benjamin thinks they assume, or, more precisely, our view of their value and reality, assumes an especially powerful and virulent form in modern times. In contrast, experience can be the source, Benjamin thinks, of a most valuable kind of counsel or even wisdom. That wisdom treats not just the way life unfolds but also those sacred realities that impinge on or inform ordinary life.[11]

Benjamin claims that moderns live in a world in which discrete experiences are what people pursue. We all are, in fact, taught to pursue them by both commercial and political powers that benefit from a populace that has those pursuits. Commercial powers profit from people who both live in a world made up of separable experiences and see their fulfillment in terms of the accumulation of more and more discrete experiences. Political powers profit from such a situation because neither people nor commercial entities will challenge the political order if that order generates conditions that ensure there are always more discrete experiences to accumulate.

In these kinds of circumstances most people will be dazed, even stupified, both by the various experiences that impinge on them and by their quest to accumulate those experiences that define them. Moreover, their hopes for happiness will rest on an accelerating amassing of more experiences. These experiences are usually defined in terms of the material objects, the interchangeable commodities that are thought to carry them or make them possible. The world is constituted by just experiences; it provides none of the counsel about life's long contours and

[11] This notion of experience differs substantially from those currents of the Chinese tradition that stress "experience" and owe much to Zhuangzi. That remains true even if an idea of the fulfilling integrity of the individual moment may seem to connect them—as well as to provide a rationale for the elective affinity we can see between forms of Chan Buddhism and the ability to be thoroughly enmeshed in modern society.

impinging sacred realities that experience can. That distinctive feature manifests clearly the fundamental difference between traditional and modern perspectives.[12]

Benjamin presents in dramatic fashion, then, a modern world in which spiritual meaning cannot be salvaged from the ruins of a traditional world that is simply gone, replaced by a new realm. Furthermore, that new realm is one in which all people must make their way, so omnipresent is it, no matter what may be their hesitations about many of its manifestations. Some people may wish for an older world, may even be haunted by memories of and hopes for traditional consolations and fixed realities. Nonetheless, if they are to see the true form of the world they inhabit—and more important, that inhabits them—they must acknowledge two matters.

First is that any pursuit of a traditional world is rationally impossible or at least unfeasible. Second is that such a pursuit is emotionally possible only if a great cost is paid. It is *rationally impossible* because the very ways people think, the rational constructs in which they move and the webs of belief on which they rely have changed fundamentally. This notion of rational impossibility involves some delicate theoretical points that Benjamin seems to grasp only imperfectly, but the basic outline of his position is reliable enough to generate guarded assent. Far more compelling is his detailed account of the emotional possibility—and cost—of reclaiming tradition. Benjamin is, in fact, at his most nuanced and persuasive on that subject, to which we now turn.

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[12] A version of the stark distinction Benjamin highlights is, of course, evident before modern times, but it also differs in instructive ways. It appears most clearly in the disquiets with or attacks on literary, especially poetic, expression. Both the suspicion of poetry and the attempt to tame its possibly subversive energies have long but often illuminatingly different histories in, say, ancient China and Greece. (See James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry.*) Kongzi and Mengzi tame poetry, for example, by moralizing it through allegorical readings—at times extremely strained—that turn, for instance, the erotic into the political. (See Donald Holzman, "Confucius and Ancient Chinese Literary Criticism.") Plato's disquiets and attacks, as well as Aristotle's careful placement of its effects, are more comprehensive in scope, if less prone to the literalism of allegorization. All these display the import of Owen's comment that "the moralists who have always buzzed around poetry were quite correct; in their hearts they heard the Sirens singing them to shipwreck" (Stephen Owen, *Mi-Lou, Poetry, and the Labyrinth of Desire*, 195); also see C. K. Williams's development of similar ideas in *Poetry and Consciousness.* Crucial to more recent differences is the way that during the medieval period in the West, notably with Aquinas's account, poetry is made subsidiary to reflective inquiry—especially important, as that time also witnessed the birth of universities. (See Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages.*) The history in China is very different: for many of the most sophisticated people, philosophy triumphed in only limited areas and poetry came to play a dominant role.

An embracing of the traditional world is emotionally possible, but only at the cost of deforming central human capacities. One kind of recovery rests on a sort of *sentimentality* or even mawkish nostalgia. It involves, among other looming deficiencies, an unwillingness to acknowledge the role historical contingencies play in human life. Further, it demands attending only intermittently to the irreducible conflicts that any life always presents. Finally, it usually rests on a willed inability to face directly the obviously different realities that the past and the present display.

This kind of sentimentality harms few people in serious ways. But it does cut people off from past worlds that could nourish them if they were to understand the effort a real recovery involves and then make it. Moreover, it makes people prey to unacknowledged forces, internal or external, that can upset their emotional balance or even overwhelm them.

Another kind of recovery involves the dangerously ambivalent enterprise of *appropriating selectively reformulated features* of the past. This can unleash truly destructive forces, especially when certain features of the past are transferred to a modern world. That phenomenon appears in the rise of Nazism and fascism more generally, as well as in the varied nihilistic celebrations of military heroism. Both were seen and meticulously reported by Benjamin.

This more destructive kind of recovery can combine with the first in many ways. In fact, the Europe of Benjamin's time—like parts of our contemporary world—manifested any number of such unholy alliances. Most horrifying, perhaps, are those that combine a selective sentimentality and a fierce destructiveness. All of them, however, deform human lives.

These emotional deformations are both made more likely and intensified, Benjamin thinks, because moderns live in cultures that aim to produce—or at least does generate—people who are either inattentive to or blind about much of their emotional life. Modern society for him largely consists in people who are numbed, unable to respond nimbly or even at all, to what could animate them emotionally. Several interlocking factors produce this phenomenon. Most notable, for Benjamin, are the myriad ways political and commercial masters of image and shadow wield "true power": the ability to convince people of things that oppose their real interests. This world invites people to avoid or reject emotions, especially emotions that separate them from conventional mores, generate significant internal conflicts, and test conventional morality.

This analysis constitutes the challenge that Benjamin lays down to all attempts to turn to traditional texts or practices for spiritual meaning. It is not, however, the whole story. Benjamin's own personal and intellectual journey includes sustained attempts to find spiritual sustenance in texts and practices from the past. Several parts of his work reflect this journey; they therefore point in another, for us, extremely important direction.

Put more precisely, Benjamin challenges us because he depicts the *immense difficulty of harmonizing two matters*. One is acknowledging fully what historical change always produces—and especially produces when technology and commerce combine in the modern period. (That combination is illustrated by the Paris Arcades and the life they both produce and exemplify.) The other is recognizing, even accepting, what appears in fragments that carry—to use Benjamin's own terms of art—the storyteller's wisdom, or display the messianic, or probe the mystical, or illuminate the intent that informs translation's most basic task, or manifest the power of "shock experiences" [*Chockerfahrun*].[13]

All these notions connect and help define what literary works, very broadly understood, can produce that connects people with realities they can find in no other fashion. In examining these notions Benjamin surrenders neither side of his understanding, neither the immense differences between the traditional and the modern, nor the frail but real possibilities of bridging them. This remains true even if the one side, focused on the gulf, leads him to dark musings and seemingly ungrounded hope while the other side leads him to always elusive, at times arcane, and often elusive formulations about realms that are hard to pin down.

Of special importance to us are the ways important features of Benjamin's understanding connect not just with, say, Baudelaire's project, about which he writes at length. They also connect with figures of importance to us about whom he knew nothing, figures such as the Du Fu of his later poems and some of those he draws on, like Mengzi, Zhuangzi, or even Xunzi. The single piece of Benjamin

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[13] See, e.g., Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 162; vol. 4, 391; vol. 3, 161; vol. 1, 258–59; vol. 4, 319. These are among the most difficult and elusive notions in Benjamin. His notion of the mystical, for instance, calls on his distinctive understanding of ideas drawn from often arcane parts of the Jewish tradition, such as those that manifest kabbalistic impulses or call on especially subtle ideas of the messianic. Further, it can lead to evocative but perplexing formulations, as when in discussing Kafka (and by implication everyone), he says people must turn to tradition, or more exactly—in an especially notable expression—"mystical experience (which is, above all, the experience of tradition)" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 325). These instances support the acuity of a remark made by one of Benjamin's most subtle readers, Samuel Weber. In commenting about a passage he writes: "Perhaps these few remarks will suffice to suggest how complex a role 'religion' or 'religions' play in Benjamin's writing," and how we ought to recognize the dangers of facile generalizations in treating the subject (Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's—Abilities*, 215). The passage in question happens to be very relevant to our basic concerns. In it, Benjamin is highlighting the importance of "studying" in the Jewish tradition but then adds the following surprising comment: "Perhaps such studies were worth nothing. But they stand very close to that Nothing, which alone can make Anything useful: that is to say, the Tao" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 213).

that most consistently relates closely to these and other Chinese materials—significant because of its focus on long experience—is his fearsomely complicated essay on storytelling, but treating that essay is a tale for another day.[14] Let us then turn to and end with a more abstract account of the ways Confucian texts can be seen as manifesting what Benjamin thinks can bridge the gap between traditional and modern understandings and practices.

The Confucian Tradition's Possible Contributions

The possible contributions to our inquiry that can be made by Confucianism are multiple, and even a recognition of that multiplicity involves treating only a few currents in a long and wide river.[15] We will, therefore, focus briefly on only one

[14] The essay on the storyteller appears in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (vol. 3), 143–66. A good example of the needed process is Benjamin's own quest to replace the idea of the traditional aura (see vol. 3, 104–5) and all that it implies with ideas about the messianic, the storyteller, and the illuminating fragment; it was a project ended by his own tragedy. That kind of quest can be said to clarify, even determine, many Confucians' reflections on their own tradition and many perspectives about it. Illuminating examples include the following three motifs in Du Fu: the characterization of Mengzi and Kongzi as people both chosen and thwarted by heaven; his own portrait of himself as often defined by his conflicting loyalties and roles; and the role in him of what we can, following Benjamin, call his own version of the messianic, his continuing hope for the restoration of a harmonious social order led by a sage emperor (see Lee Yearley, "Poetic Language: Zhuangzi and Du Fu's Poetic Ideals"). Also note the argument that Chinese perspectives about which, say, Freud knew nothing, are ones that he would have found congenial; see Lee Yearley, "Freud and China" and "Freud and Zhuangzi."

[15] I appreciate that all simple descriptions of Confucianism are suspect because in so rich a tradition there are powerful crosscurrents. Indeed, one can even wonder about the appropriateness of the metaphor of crosscurrents in a river, as it takes a brave soul to identify confidently the basic contours of any single stream. That difficulty may help explain the length and texture of some of the following comments in footnotes: they display the desire to provide a minimally just account of the tradition.

Despite these caveats, allow me to note contributions other than the one that is my main concern. First, the ways humans can and must negotiate through perhaps the most central and vexing ordinary connections they have: those constituted by links of blood, sacrifice, and generational distance. Second, the role of community as what both fundamentally constitutes personal identity and is the source of most inclinations and obligations to serve other people. Third, the key role educational communities (understood as far more than places that enable people to acquire basic information and discrete skills) play in the lives of both communities and

area: the form Confucian teaching often takes and the ways the reading of Confucian texts can be seen as a spiritual exercise. This inquiry is oriented (though not exclusively) toward those people for whom the Western tradition, not the Confucian tradition, is, in some sense of the word, their "home." It also works from the suspicion that Confucianism may be the most misunderstood of all our great religious traditions.

More precisely put, the inquiry concerns the forms Confucian textual teaching takes when two conditions obtain. One is that the *subject* is the pursuit of human excellence or virtue—in both the individual and the community. The other is that the difficulties faced are how best to introduce that subject convincingly and to guide people effectively toward an adequate realization of virtue in their own life. This subject has in some form been crucial to the Confucian tradition from its earliest beginnings and deeply affects the ways Confucians think and feel about almost everything.

Put in fancier academic dress, the topic is what the Confucian tradition teaches us about the genres, the modes of presentation, to use when treating the subject of human excellence. This covers a whole set of related topics; for instance, the uses of figurative language, the place and undercutting of narrative, and the function of apparent non sequiturs. Any full treatment also includes, of course, the social instantiations of such teaching. They range from the roles the commentary tradition played in forming acceptable interpretations, to the specific practices that defined the interactions of particular teachers and students, to the considerable effect that mastery of some texts and techniques had on a person's livelihood. We focus here, however, only on Confucianism as a *literary* tradition and the forms of writing and reading it can generate, especially in today's world.

This subject is chosen for its centrality to the Confucian tradition; the distinctiveness of the Confucian tradition's account when compared to Western treatments; and the way it challenges the Western tradition. In this

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individuals. Fourth, the varied and massive implications of the capacious category still best if misleadingly translated as "ritual" (*li*): the prescribed social forms and roles that make possible flourishing individual and social lives. Fifth, the delineation (in especially that part of the tradition that asserts Mengzi's centrality) of a few limited qualities that define crucial features of all human beings, whatever may be the particular additions that a specific culture makes to them.

The Confucian understanding of each of these areas is significant, but that does not mean that their insights about these matters are always uniform or clear, much less fully convincing, especially to moderns. It does mean, however, that the Confucian tradition provides guidance about both the complex depth of these subjects and the ways people might negotiate among the various options and difficulties they present.

area, the West has much to learn from Confucianism, as is evident if we look at a set of common and related Western criticisms of the Confucian tradition. The most important of these criticisms are that the tradition lacks three related features: rigor defined as sophisticated rational modes of inquiry; powerful forms of reflection, with the self-consciousness and distance from the self's usual concerns it produces; and evident ways to consider given social forms critically and thereby also to recommend changes to them. Much in these criticisms arises from failures to understand how genres and forms of presentation operate in the Confucian tradition and what that operation implies. An especially illuminating approach to this subject is to consider the ways reading Confucian texts can be seen as a distinctive kind of a spiritual exercise.

Reading Confucian Texts as a Spiritual Exercise

These texts aim to train readers in a specific kind of spiritual exercise, to involve them in an ascetic exercise with spiritual goals. (The term "spiritual" is employed here in the way defined earlier, and "spiritual exercise" is used in Hadot's sense, but with a recognition of the emendations to and questions about that sense made by Foucault.)[16] This approach is particularly noteworthy for those for whom the

[16] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, contains a remarkable account of a position that underlies connections like those made here: the ways certain ancient views may resemble modern views in a fashion that intervening ones do not. In Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, see especially 81–144; for references to Foucault's critical account and a balanced evaluation of it, see Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, 157–88. A crucial general issue in all these accounts is the role of conventional social expectations in spiritual practices; it is also especially important for Confucianism, given questions about its ability to treat those elements in society that may be repressive or represent false fixities (see Lee Yearley, "Virtue Ethics in Ancient China: Light Shed and Shadows Cast"). The problem is especially acute if, as in Foucault's account, those elements deeply inform most kinds of self-cultivation and, even more troubling, inform them because they produce socially desirable forms of cultivation. Doubts have of course been raised, as in Hadot's critique, about features of Foucault's account, and Foucault himself seems to have complicated his own understanding of the ways both social norms were internalized by the process of self-cultivation and some norms might serve the spiritual needs of small groups. Nonetheless, his work highlights how self-cultivation regimens often impose one or another socially desirable view of how to live a life. It shows how often a practice that supposedly is best understood as liberating more human capabilities also brings in its wake other forms of limitations; or witnesses to the subtle power of new kinds of authority; or rests on a picture of the human almost as problematic as the one it replaces.

Confucian tradition remains in some way alien, because it involves the demand that people study these texts in a way that takes seriously their claim on a person's allegiances.

Put in the terminology of some Neo-Confucians, the process is the kind of self-cultivation that is a "strenuous spiritual effort": a *gongfu* or sustained effort of both self-understanding and self-cultivation that focuses on examining one's reactions to concrete events, real or textual. Put in the terminology of the most enduring educational tradition in the West, the process is that kind of *paideia* in which the nurture of the soul is the goal that animates the whole endeavor. Put in the terminology of an influential modern Western movement, existentialism, these texts not only have much to teach us but they also present a "call" (*Ruf*) in the sense of a summons to change our way of understanding and living.

A comfortable way to approach these matters is to emphasize that significant Confucian texts demand the kind of reading that any sophisticated literary text demands. This process draws on the operations, for instance, of the hermeneutical circle: the way readers initially understand a text in terms of their own world but then have their world changed by the text, a process that continues in a circle of changing understandings for as long as the work remains a challenging object. A distinctive feature of this process in many Confucian texts, as with some other kinds of literary texts, is that it provokes hermeneutical crises in readers. These crises occur when the text forces readers to judge the value of the responses of some person in the text, whether real or fictional, and therefore also to judge their own grasp of what is important.

A more challenging approach focuses on the claim that reading these texts helps people to articulate something present but unclear in their own understanding, helps them to make explicit what is only implicit. This occurs because examining the texts focuses attention on discrete and valuable but heretofore inchoate features of people's overall perspective. This articulation of the implicit, this making explicit what was inchoate, underlies what can occur when people attentively encounter Confucian texts.

The claim Confucians present here rests on two notions, one considerably more controversial than the other. The less controversial notion is that although we normally are strangers to ourselves, we also have capacities for self-understanding that can be activated. The activation can, however, be extremely difficult, and it may demand the use of language that is poetic or borders on the poetic.

The more controversial notion, found especially in those parts of the tradition that are fundamentally indebted to Mengzi, is that what is "truly" implicit in human beings has universal characteristics. The exact theoretical features of those characteristics are, however, contested within the tradition. Even more important are questions about just how specific are the actual demands those characteristics make and therefore what degree of creative self-fashioning they may allow or even promote.

These notions underlie the general idea that reading Confucian texts is a kind of spiritual exercise. But other features, Confucians believe, make the achievement distinctive, one that few texts can match even if much important literature can be approached in a similar way. Most notable are a set of qualities that telegraphically put are as follows: the authors' spiritual achievements; their distinctive kind of literary skill; their appreciation of the difficulties an appropriate cultivation process presents; and, for many Confucians, their grasp of and ability to express a set of metaphysical claims about the ultimate constitution of the human self.

All of this helps to explain the Confucian use of genres that, to employ Western categories, are more often literary than theoretical. Confucian presentations of virtue are then not confined by the theoretical apparatus present (to use two especially pungent examples) either in medieval Western Scholasticism or in its modern heir, Anglo-American analytic philosophy. That fact is especially significant because at least some Confucians—e.g., Mengzi and Xunzi—were capable of employing theoretical forms of analysis that resemble those two Western movements, and they usually chose not to utilize them.

The genres these Confucians did choose generate strong responses that both involve significant subjective dimensions and include emotional reactions that are similar to aesthetic responses to the ugly or beautiful. Although specifiable kinds of thinking—many of which resemble features of those sorts of thinking involved in practical planning—are at times evident, other modes are more common. A crucial one involves the highlighting of reactions that show little resemblance to ordinary processes of thinking. Many of the most significant passages in the *Mengzi*, for example, highlight the significance of making contact with the subtle movements of compassion or shame. They exemplify how the most important processes displayed in and commended by Confucian texts often show only vague resemblances to the rational operation of simple planning, much less logical analysis.[17]

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[17] A good example of the treatment of such a decision is *Mengzi* 2A7, especially as the actual presentation owes little to ordinary thinking; for an analysis see Lee Yearley, "Selves, Virtues, Odd Genres, and Alien Guides." (The situation becomes, of course, much more complicated when, as in some forms of Neo-Confucianism, the question of restructuring society becomes prominent.) See Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas*, 95–102, for treatments of rationality that resemble important aspects of what is discussed here. Also note how Xunzi, from a very different perspective, emphasizes the limits of rationality in his consideration of death rituals; see Lee Yearley, "Xunzi: Ritualization as Humanization." Many serious people have found fault with this Confucian approach to the teaching of human fulfillment. They emphasize the problems that arise because Confucian texts lack sustained formal argumentation; are inattentive to significant alternative views; and fail to treat fully or at all basic topics such as justice or rationality. In their most crass form, these criticisms witness to the kind of disabling parochialism and

Put one way, rhetorical forms are crucial, especially those deeply informed by distinctly literary modes. Readers do not face passages that are the shadowgraphs of ideas and therefore can be put into propositional forms that leave no remainder. The language they encounter is not the mere adornment of an idea; rather, it is constitutive and makes possible the appropriation of the proper perspective.

Confucians recognize, of course, how dangerous rhetorical presentations can be. They understand how easily such presentations can promote perspectives that distort or even destroy true human actualizations. Mengzi, for example, calls "insight into words" one of his two great gifts, and early sections in the *Lunyu*, such as section 4, manifest some of the most astonishing examples of austere rhetoric—with its implicit criticism of other kinds of rhetoric—anywhere in the world.[18]

Confucians are consistently and acutely aware of both the dangers in and the need for rhetoric. They consequently think that distinguishing rhetorical forms is crucial, even if they have, for good reasons, no rulebook that enables them easily to make such distinctions. Especially important to them is recognizing the ongoing implications of an understanding that rhetorical presentations are part of a more general process of self-cultivation. That general process involves various other disciplines, participation in a tradition, and an appreciation of the implications of the good person criterion, the admittedly circular idea that the good person provides the standard by which good actions can be identified. The Confucian approach to this subject is, then, a subtle and powerful one that presents both significant challenges and striking opportunities.[19]

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circularity that allow for little discussion. Other, more sensitive kinds of criticism can still fail to address the relevant texts in ways that respect both their alien character and the need to elaborate them. Some traditional Western topics in ethics, for instance, are either treated in revealingly different ways (e.g., the character of justice) or are avoided for challenging reasons (e.g., rationality). Still other topics are not treated fully because the central Confucian concern is with the character and acquisition of those virtues that the fulfilled person displays.

[18] See *Mengzi* 2A2 and, for the analysis of *Lunyu* Book Four, Lee Yearley, "An Existentialist Reading of Book Four of the *Analects*."

[19] In saying this, I do not deny that the process Confucians commend contains features that manifest apparent weaknesses. Most notable are the following five: the process focuses too exclusively on changes in the individual; the process often fails to provide warrants for adjudicating differences; the process cannot move the truly insensitive; the process seems to disregard too many significant, if ordinary, kinds of ethical thinking; the process is not attentive enough to the need for at least some kind of abstract theoretical analysis and justification. Confucian texts do contain responses to at least several of these criticisms. Despite this, it remains

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true that Confucians believe ordinary ethical thinking has a very limited place. Moreover, they oppose only the most exaggerated focus on the significance of individual cultivation or disregard for rational justification. These positions reflect two Confucian principles about presentations when the subject is understanding and pursuing the human good, each of which has striking implications. One is that simple rational arguments about this subject will only rarely affect those people who most need help. (That group, it seems, includes virtually all of us at some point in our lives.) The other is that those arguments, or even the appropriate generalities they produce, will often not fundamentally affect most people in those situations where they most need help. Confucians continue to believe, then, that only through changes in the character of individuals and, concomitantly, a new understanding of the range and forms of presentation can they help produce what needs to be produced. Only through those means can larger social issues be well answered; only through those means can ordinary ethical thought be well used; only through those means can reflective analysis be employed in appropriate ways.

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