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Introduction: “Appreciating” Confucianism

A Historically Appreciated Confucianism

The philosopher and teacher, Kongfuzi 孔夫子, latinized as “Confucius,” lends his name to the English (but not the Chinese) expression of this tradition called “Confucianism.” Confucius was certainly a flesh-and-blood historical person who lived, taught, and died some twenty-five centuries ago, consolidating in his own time a formidable legacy of wisdom that has been passed down and applied through the ages to shape the character of an entire culture. In and of itself, the profoundly personal model of Confucius remembered by his protégés through those intimate snapshots of his life collected in the middle chapters of the *Analects* has its own value and meaning. But then, as Confucius reportedly said of himself, most of what he had to offer had ancient roots, and that he was one who was inclined to follow the established path rather than strike out in new directions.¹ Indeed it is perhaps for this reason that in the Chinese language itself the tradition is not identified specifically with Confucius as “Confucianism,” but rather with the *ru* 儒 literati class who over the centuries provided the cultural tradition with its evolving “literati learning” (*ruxue* 儒學). And consistent with Confucius’s own premises, this legacy called *ruxue*—the always-porous core of an aggregating Chinese culture—is both vital and corporate. That is, Confucianism has been appropriated, commented upon, reinterpreted, and reauthorized by each of some eighty generations of Chinese scholars and intellectuals that across the ages have contributed their own best thoughts to this “literati learning” as a continuous, living tradition.

Hence, for us in the first decades of the twenty-first century, “appreciating” Confucianism means no more or less than participating in this evolutionary process at a juncture when Confucian values will as never before emerge on the world stage as a cultural force to be reckoned with. In our own much-troubled historical moment, in the wake of the unrelenting holocaust of the twentieth century, it behooves us all to find whatever resources we can within human culture to do much better than we have done in making the most of the human experience. This living Confucian legacy is one substantial resource for informing and inspiring new directions in human culture, a legacy that for the past two centuries and largely for economic and political reasons, has been muted and ignored. The contention of this monograph then, is that we are entering upon a transitional period of enormous proportions with the imminent emergence of a new cultural order, and that Confucianism offers us philosophical assets that can be resourced and applied to serve not only the renaissance of a revitalized Chinese culture, but also the interests of world culture more broadly. Thus, in identifying, elaborating upon, and applying those elements within this continuing Confucian tradition that can be brought into productive conversation with cultural narratives that lie beyond it, we will find that it can serve as a significant source for the enrichment of our own ways of thinking and living. At the same time, this integrative process will further “appreciate” Confucianism itself by offering it opportunities for its own creative growth and innovation.

“Appreciation” as “increase in value” is not new in the evolution of Confucianism. Historically, marked growth occurred within the tradition itself when in the fourth century BCE a shrewd early proponent of this tradition named Xunzi 荀子 co-opted the disputational vocabulary of the Mohists to strengthen his Confucian arguments, adapted the military terminology of the Strategists to prioritize his Confucian values, and applied the regulative rigor and strictness of the Legalists to bring discipline to his vision of the Confucian project of personal cultivation. All of Xunzi’s philosophical appropriation was done in service to a newly fortified Confucianism that emerged in the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) to become a state ideology that would persist for nearly two millennia. For Xunzi, such broad assimilation directed at exploiting and ingesting the intellectual resources of precisely those philosophical lineages best able to compete with Confucianism was a deliberate and ultimately

successful strategy used to enhance and to galvanize an emerging, syncretic tradition.

This kind of appreciation of Confucianism has also occurred from without as two waves of “Western learning” have rolled up upon the Confucian shore to create tide pools and ecotones in which cultural experimentation has flourished. The first wave of Western learning began during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) when the challenge of South Asian Buddhist ideas reset the agenda for a Chinese culture broadly, and in the centuries to follow, produced a responsive and hybridic neo-Confucianism (*daoxue* 道學) that was inspired by Buddhist approaches to personal growth and transformation. The neo-Confucians of the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties certainly railed against their own thin caricature of the foreign Buddhist teachings, but at the same time, by absorbing and elaborating upon the spiritual resources of this competing tradition, they redefined their own lofty aspirations of sagehood. And of course in this encounter between Confucianism and Buddhism, thoroughly sinified lineages of Buddhism such as Huayan 華嚴, Sanlun 三論, and Chan 禪宗 also produced a much-appreciated Chinese Buddhism that in one form or another has continued to spread throughout the East Asian world and beyond, down to our present day.

The second wave of Western learning arrived in a set that began in the late sixteenth century with the classical learning and science of the Jesuits who were led in their first encounter by Matteo Ricci. This first surge was followed a century and a half later by the broad arts and sciences curriculum of the Protestant missionaries, and then again in another wave by the timely translations of evolutionary theories undertaken by scholars such as Yan Fu 嚴復 who sought the liberalization of Chinese culture by appeal to Western science and democracy. This second set has continued to wash up on China’s shores in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with the competing ideologies of Marxist socialism and democratic capitalism, and with the influence of decidedly Western taxonomies and theoretical models that continue to hold sway within the Chinese academy. The thoroughly comparative doctrines of many if not most of the twentieth-century Chinese philosophers who since the 1980s have come to be known as the “New Confucians”—the *xinruxuejia* 新儒學家—are self-conscious amalgams of traditional Chinese ideas and substantial borrowings from

systematic Western philosophy. There is the attempt of Xiong Shili 熊十力 to revitalize Confucianism through a synthesis of Yogacara Buddhism with Western and Chinese ideas, the complex and critical appropriation of Kant by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, the imaginative applications of Hegel and Whitehead by Tang Junyi 唐君毅, the eclectic and creative assimilation of much of the history of Western philosophy by Fang Dongmei 方東美, and on it goes. There is no question that Confucianism has in many ways become more formidable because of this continuing appropriation of elements of Western learning, although it is a criticism well made that the systematized, intellectualized, and theorized iteration of Confucian ideas in imitation of abstract Western philosophical theory by some of these New Confucians has to an important degree set Confucianism adrift from its anchor in the daily lives of the people.

In this essay, I will argue that the long-postponed impact of Confucian values on different aspects of the world's philosophical and cultural traditions is now on the horizon, and that a creative fusion of Confucianism with other narratives will follow behind the rise of China as a contemporary economic and political force.² As Confucian values spread to become a global cultural factor in our own time, it will not only be the other traditions it encounters that will be altered, challenged, and enriched. Indeed, Confucianism itself will continue to be transformed in the process.

Before we attempt to anticipate more specifically what Confucianism will have on offer in reconfiguring the shape of world civilization in our own time, we might do well to address an immediate objection that this claim about the pending influence of Confucian values might provoke. Some critics of old China might worry that such an assertion is to advocate for an effete and antiquarian tradition that many have come to see as a burden weighing down the new China as it finally takes its place at the table of nations. Others will certainly see notions such as "Confucian role ethics" and "Confucian democracy" as oxymoronic. For them, a less corrupt and more democratic China, if it ever comes to be, will be a decidedly post-Confucian phenomenon. For yet others, they will dismiss this claim about the imminent impact of Confucian values on world culture as the prediction of a perhaps well-intended, but fatally naïve foreign convert with an idealization of Cathay that has

failed to register the sometimes shrill but always passionate voices of the courageous reformers of the New Culture movement at the beginning of the last century. Indeed, they will say, such an inflation of Confucianism is undoubtedly the fantasy of a romantic who has failed to take adequate account of the painful humiliation Confucian China suffered in its resistance first to decades of an escalating foreign imperialism and more recently to the ineluctable forces of modernity.

Leibniz's Appreciation of Confucian China

Perhaps the best answer to this concern that I am predicting too much influence from Confucian philosophy on an evolving world culture is to recall an earlier European advocate of the fundamental worth of this tradition. In anticipating this impending rise of Chinese cultural influence today, we might remember that centuries ago, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a comparative philosopher of a former age and anything but a naïve romantic, attempted to make productive sense of Confucian China for the culture of his own time and place.³ Leibniz was a universalist of the first order, and thus an unlikely source of appreciation for a usually pragmatic Confucian culture. Politically Leibniz was a federalist, religiously an ecumenicalist, and linguistically he searched for and saw in the ancient polyphonic Chinese script a language of what he thought to be ideographs that might possibly reveal the "universal characteristic" of both the universe and the structure of the mind through which to unify the communication of the world.⁴ He saw parallels between the dyadic *yinyang* 陰陽 lines of the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* and the binary arithmetic system he had been developing as a basis for his infinitesimal calculus, and he discovered a shared biblical chronology that began in antiquity with the parallel flood myths of Noah recounted in Genesis, and Yu the Great (Da Yu 大禹), reputed to be the founder of the Xia dynasty.

In the last year of his life (1716), perhaps anticipating a better place at the Lord's table, Leibniz wrote his *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*.⁵ In this treatise, he argues that Chinese civilization early on had been quite properly Christian, but that the Chinese population had "strayed from the truth and even from their own antiquity."⁶ In reflecting on the early Confucian doctrines that everywhere celebrate "Heaven"

(*tian* 天), Leibniz concludes that the tradition “is pure Christianity, insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts.”⁷ Unfortunately for China, continues Leibniz’s argument, intervening cultural distractions and Confucian hubris have led modern China and its Mandarins into a kind of theoretical and religious amnesia in which they knew neither the demonstrable science of the mind nor the Truth of their own God. The universalistic and rationalistic impulses behind Leibniz’s contribution to the Western philosophical tradition have led some scholars to dismiss his interest in China as at best a condescending cultural appropriation, and at worst, a kind of cultural imperialism. In short, as this story goes, his motivation for turning to the Far East was simply a matter of corroboration, and thus his celebration of China amounts to nothing more than an appeal to another high culture as a means of demonstrating the truth of his own European universal indices. But those who would tell such a story should know their Leibniz better.

In the Preface to the *Novissima Sinica* written during the period of 1697–99, an astute and penetrating Leibniz offers a synoptic comparison of the contributions of European and Chinese culture that would satisfy even the most optimistic interpreters of this antique Chinese culture. Leibniz allows that in technologies, crafts, and artifacts, we Europeans stand on equal ground with the Chinese, with each people having “knowledge which it could with profit communicate to the other.”⁸ In theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and in particular, theology, however, there is a clear European superiority. Indeed, we Europeans “excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material.”⁹ We own the theoretical sciences and surpass the Chinese in those rational tools of the intellect that lead us to demonstrable truth, whilst the Chinese struggle with a kind of empirical geometry owned by most artisans.

As a reluctant aside, Leibniz offers a second area in which Europe overshadows the China of his day. For it is much to Europe’s shame, he laments, that we have a decided advantage in the military arts. Leibniz allows that this particular superiority is not out of ignorance or incompetence on the part of the Chinese, but rather is a matter of deliberate choice, and it is to their credit, for as a people they properly “despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men.”¹⁰

In fact, this Chinese antipathy toward conflict and belligerence

is not unrelated to what Leibniz perceives to be this culture's greatest achievement. On Leibniz's reading, the Chinese excel in the pursuit of civil philosophy where Chinese "civilization" has set a standard far superior to that of Europe. In his own words:

But who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life? Yet now we find this to be so among the Chinese, as we learn to know them better. And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals. Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible.... Certainly the Chinese above all others have attained a higher standard. In a vast multitude of men they have virtually accomplished more than the founders of religious orders among us have achieved within their own narrow ranks.¹¹

On Leibniz's estimation, China's ongoing achievements in practical philosophy enabled them to excel in the establishment and maintenance of social order at all of its many different levels: familial, communal, political, and religious. Leibniz attributes this inspiring public virtuosity to the way in which observing *li* 禮—that is, being committed to the pursuit of propriety in one's familial and communal roles and relationships—functions to produce a religious *ethos* in the human community.

So great is obedience toward superiors and reverence toward elders, so religious, almost, is the relation of children toward parents, that for children to contrive anything violent against their parents even by word, is almost unheard of.... Moreover, there is among equals, or those having little obligations to one another, a marvelous respect, and an established order of duties. To us, not enough accustomed to act by reason and rule, these smack of servitude; yet among them, where these duties are made natural by use, they are observed gladly.¹²

Considering the relatively limited information on China available to Leibniz in his own time, this philosopher, resisting his own formalist

philosophical proclivities that might have inclined him steeply in the opposite direction, was indeed a surprisingly keen and honest observer of the human experience. In advancing his own generalizations about both European and Chinese cultures, he saw a clear contrast between the value invested in those abstract, theoretical disciplines in the European academy that are in search of axiomatic-deductive demonstration and the more aesthetic and pragmatic applications of the Chinese tradition—a distinction that broadly distinguishes a European confidence in the dividends of the rational sciences from those alternative rewards that can be derived from virtuosity in the art of living itself. In fact, it was more than a fundamental sympathy and respect for Chinese culture that led Leibniz to defend Matteo Ricci's advocacy of an accommodationist Christianity in the long simmering Rites Controversy that came to a boil in Rome towards the end of Leibniz's own life. Leibniz's commitment to accommodationism was based upon his conviction that the precepts of any universal civil philosophy that would seek to construct a framework for optimizing the social, political, and indeed religious life of human beings in community would do well to take into account the substantial accomplishments of Chinese culture in this same effort.

Whatever Happened to Wisdom?

Reflecting on the cultural contrast between Europe and China offered by Leibniz in *Novissima Sinica*, we might say that while he is celebrating European culture for achieving superiority in abstract knowledge and demonstrable truth, he is at the same time extolling the Chinese tradition for surpassing Europe in a kind of practical wisdom—that is, “in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals.”¹³ The language that Leibniz appeals to in making these thick cultural generalizations about the differences in the evolution of the European and Chinese narratives has its historical background. It takes us back to the commitment made to *eidos*, *theoria*, and *episteme*, the building blocks of a metaphysical realism, in the metaphysics and epistemology of early Greek philosophy in which the ideal is equated with the most real. This idealism is apparent in Leibniz's own description of the European achievement:

In the profundity of knowledge and in the theoretical disciplines we are their superiors. For besides logic and metaphysics, and the knowledge of things incorporeal, which we justly claim as peculiarly our province, we excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material.... The Chinese are thus seen to be ignorant of that great light of the mind, the art of demonstration...¹⁴

If we look back to the beginnings of the discipline of philosophy in ancient Greece, we might observe that Pythagoras certainly celebrated the contemplation of abstract, theoretical science, but for him such speculations were inseparable from and subordinate to religious practices based upon assumptions about the immortality of the human soul, to periodical ascetic observances, to a complex program of social and political reform, to sustained ethical reflection, to the pleasures of music and the benefits of a strict physical regimen, and even to rigorous dietary prescriptions and prohibitions. For historians telling the story of this period of human flourishing, the eloquent Pythagoras and his holistic, practical way of life could be most aptly described as *philosophia*—"the love of wisdom." But what happened in this Western philosophical narrative to the original meaning of "philosophy" (*philosophia*) as "the love of wisdom"—an understanding that the role of philosophy is to seek the authentication of the theoretical in practical application so as to conduce to the enjoyment of the human experience?

Pythagoras's comprehensive vision of the good life faded with time, and what had been for him a truly "philosophical" journey—that is, a quest for a practical wisdom informed by theoretical knowledge—gave way to quite a different kind of pilgrimage. Precisely how we are to parse this change in the occupation of the philosopher from philosophy as an ethical and spiritual way of life to discursive philosophy has been the preoccupation of several of Pierre Hadot's recent contributions. Hadot argues that pervasively among the ancient thinkers, "Philosophy is not wisdom, but a way of life and discourse determined by the *idea* of wisdom."¹⁵ With the melding of the Greek and the Christian traditions, medieval scholastic philosophy was placed in the service of theology, and reverence for the theoretically and spiritually abstract meant that in the fullness of time, practical wisdom, rhetoric, and the aesthetic were relegated to the down side of a prevailing dualism. In this narrative we

witness that a growing preoccupation with ontological and metaphysical questions led to a more rarified and pointed search for an abstract, unconditioned knowledge, and its promise of certainty. *Logos* that had originally encompassed both *ratio* and *oratio*—both rational explanation and rhetoric—became weighted on the side of the former. And in many circles, *philosophia*, “the love of wisdom,” had for all intents and purposes become *philoepesteme*, “the love of knowledge.” Apodictic knowledge and truth had become the vocabulary of systematic philosophy, and “wisdom” became and remains today a seldom-referenced term in the corridors of philosophy within the Western academy. While professional philosophy among its central interests continues to teach and do research in “metaphysics” and “epistemology,” “sophiology” has yet to find a place in the curriculum, and in our age of educational assessment wisdom is not usually stipulated as a desired student outcome.¹⁶

This early shift in the self-understanding of Western philosophy has not gone unnoticed in the internal critique of its twentieth century revolution.¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead diagnoses what he calls the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” as that error in reasoning committed when the formally abstracted is taken to be what is real and concrete—that is, when the ideal is taken to be what is *really* real.¹⁸ Whitehead rehearses the history and the consequences of this “fatal virus” that has come to inhibit our understanding of the intrinsic, constitutive, and productive nature of relatedness. He accuses Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus of being “unaware of the perils of abstraction” that render knowledge closed and complete, and that in fact precludes the possibility of attaining wisdom in the ordinary affairs of the day. According to Whitehead, “the history of thought” that he associates with these great men

... is a tragic mixture of vibrant disclosure and of deadening closure. The sense of penetration is lost in the certainty of completed knowledge. This dogmatism is the antichrist of learning. In the full concrete connection of things, the characters of the things connected enter into the character of the connectivity which joins them.¹⁹

What Whitehead means here by a “sense of penetration” that is compromised by assumptions about the certainty of knowledge is the creative advance made possible by achieving productive relations among unique particulars. Indeed, for Whitehead it would be this

cultivated, creative application of our understanding of how things can best relate to each other that would be the source and the substance of wisdom.

Whitehead uses friendship as an example of a relationship that is constituted by the unique character of the two persons involved, where the continuity of a real meaningful friendship is a matter of vibrant disclosure in which two persons "appreciate" each other in the most concrete sense of this term. That is, in their friendship they substantially enlarge and increase the weight and measure of each other. Importantly, the realization of this vital relationship is not at the expense of their personal uniqueness and integrity, but indeed a consequence of it. Integrity, as it applies here, means both the persistent particularity of each friend, and their "becoming one together" in the friendship. And such integrity is at once the substance of a real relationship and a source of cosmic meaning. In the growth of this achieved friendship, it is ultimately the dynamic configuration of a living friendship that has become what is most concrete, and it is persons taken as discrete individuals that has become the abstraction.

This understanding of relationality as intrinsic, constitutive, and productive is what Whitehead means by an "aesthetic" as opposed to a "rational" sense of order. For Whitehead any aesthetic achievement aspires to the fullest disclosure of the particular details in the totality of the achieved effect—in this case, the "connectivity" of the friendship itself.²⁰ If the assumption has been that "knowledge" is to be discovered in the rational comprehension of some abstract and universal truth, then it is in the pragmatic and aesthetic project of harmonizing concrete relationships and in the optimizing of the productivity of these relations that the ultimate source of "wisdom" can be found. There is for Whitehead real wisdom to be found in a "true" friendship.

Whitehead criticizes the classical Greek aesthetic sensibility harshly for losing sight of the balance needed between the particular details and the achieved harmony:

The enjoyment of Greek art is always haunted by a longing for the details to exhibit some rugged independence apart from the oppressive harmony. In the greatest examples of any form of art, a miraculous balance is achieved. The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value

enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, yet not destructive of themselves.²¹

When we turn to the art of being most fully human, disclosure in our relationships is what makes this family and this community meaningful, or said more dynamically, is what makes these radically embedded relationships a situated case of “meaning making.” Any understanding of harmony that demands conformity at the expense of a disclosing particularity in so doing sets limits on the possibility of attaining wisdom, and is for this reason, quite literally, life-threatening. As Whitehead observes:

Our lives are passed in the experience of disclosure. As we lose this sense of disclosure, we are shedding that mode of functioning which is the soul. We are descending to mere conformity with the average of the past. Complete conformity means the loss of life. There remains the barren existence of inorganic nature.²²

The thrust of what Whitehead is saying here is that the productive harmony achieved by optimizing relationships—indeed, a shared and joyful wisdom—can only emerge out of the real, reciprocated experiences of always unique-yet-overlapping persons. As such, wisdom will always be collateral rather than unilateral, correlative rather than univocal, a case of disclosure rather than closure. Wisdom is primarily concrete and local, and only then abstractable as a kind of functional knowledge.

A summary clarification to be made here for comparative philosophy is that registering the difference among the details is a critical factor in achieving a truly aesthetic harmony, and that an exaggerated emphasis upon commonality at the expense of difference threatens the very possibility of real harmony. Indeed, achieving and sustaining a robust harmony is dependent upon the ongoing, effective correlation of difference. This being said, Whitehead is not advocating the concrete details over the abstract arrangement of them. Instead, he is recommending the restoration of an optimum and inclusive balance between the concrete and the abstract to compensate for what in Greek metaphysics had become an undue emphasis on the latter at the expense of the former.²³

As we continue in our exploration of Confucianism’s vision of the consummate life, what we will find is that to the degree that the narrative of Western philosophy has stressed the abstract and the

impartial as standards for ethical adjudication, and to the degree that the narrative of Confucian philosophy has emphasized the more concrete partiality of family feeling as the source of our moral sensibilities, they will have much to say to each other. Indeed, it is precisely this difference in emphasis that anticipates an important compensatory role for Confucianism in the imminent recasting of the world cultural order.

Western Enlightenment Rationality: The Internal Critique

Unfortunately, Leibniz's appreciation of the different but complementary value of the disparate worlds produced by a European deductive rationalism on the one hand, and a Confucian bottom-up aestheticism on the other, was lost on most of the heirs to the Industrial Revolution who came to see their own Enlightenment rationality as the only game in town. Indeed, the modern European understanding of the Confucian tradition that evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a much distorted caricature produced by framing Confucian culture with an idealism not its own and by overwriting it with Europe's own top-down assumptions. Hegel is a good example of a philosopher who in his dialectically driven teleology is wedded to a theoretical-deductive understanding in ethics and most everything else. For him, the Chinese are not even immoral—they are amoral—because, lacking any sense of personal autonomy, they are unable to affirm for themselves the authority of any moral precept. According to Hegel, for the Chinese:

Moral distinctions and requirements are expressed as Laws, but so that the subjective will is governed by these Laws as by an external force. Nothing subjective in the shape of disposition, Conscience, formal Freedom, is recognized. Justice is administered only on the basis of external morality, and Government exists only as the prerogative of compulsion.... Morality is in the East likewise a subject of positive legislation, and although moral prescriptions (the *substance* of their Ethics) may be perfect, what should be internal subjective sentiment is made a matter of external arrangement.... While *we* obey, because what we are required to do is confirmed by an *internal* sanction, there the Law is regarded as inherently and absolutely valid without a sense of the want of this subjective confirmation.²⁴

This construal of Chinese morality as being purely objective without regard for subjective confirmation echoes Hegel's criticism of the excessive abstractness of Kant's Moral Law in formalizing our natural moral intuitions by assuming the application of pure rational thought without reference to the concrete beliefs, institutions, and traditions that shape our thinking. What Hegel is not considering in the Confucian case, of course, is that ritual norms (*li*) differ fundamentally from the notion of law in that, far from being external in their moral force, they require a process of appropriation, personalization, and internalization—an insight that we have seen was not lost on Leibniz. Indeed, it is precisely because of this personal confirmation that governing through ritual norms is a considered strategy for providing a basis for the self-ordering of the community that precludes the need for any external coercion.²⁵

In any case, the influence of this Hegelian picture of an Oriental despotism in which all authority lies with the emperor has had enormous play in the way in which Chinese history, politics, and philosophies have come to be understood within the Western academy, and is still alive and well as an interpretive framework.²⁶ Further, the Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of order that inspired this interpretation of a Chinese despotism have had consequences for the Western philosophical tradition itself that are more dire than simply an interpretive problem reflected in the misconstrual of the Chinese cultural tradition. Indeed, the issue runs much deeper, precipitating as it has the internal revolution within twentieth-century Western philosophy.

The Leibnizean valorization of the theoretical-deductive sciences as the hallmark of the European self-understanding perpetuated an entrenched and indeed fallacious way of thinking that came increasingly under assault in the twentieth-century self-critical phase of the Western philosophical narrative. William James for example, himself an heir to an Emersonian celebration of process and particularity, expresses concern about the consequences of investing so much in this refined rationalist approach to knowing our world that makes of philosophy “a kind of marble temple shining on a hill”.²⁷

The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested.²⁸

In fact, James was a process philosopher who argued for overcoming a substance understanding of "things" by giving equal status to the conjunctions and transitions that obtain among them, and who suggested that every sentence should end with "and...". For a philosopher who is reputed to have defined philosophy as "the peculiarly stubborn attempt to think clearly," James's notion of clarity was not so simple. Indeed, with deep respect for the complexity of the human experience, he takes his challenge to rationalism to be the nub of his own philosophical contribution:

It is ... the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.²⁹

And real vestiges of this entrenched rationalist prejudice seem alive and well in our contemporary philosophical discourse. In reflecting upon alternative conceptions of persons in his evaluation of contemporary rights talk, for example, Henry Rosemont gives voice to what he takes to be the limitations of recommending an abstractive, rationalistic model of the discrete human being to alternative cultural traditions. He states:

In the first place, the view of human beings as autonomous, rational individuals would be seen by a great many of the world's peoples as simply false. Utilizing an impoverished—and largely bureaucratic—technical vocabulary emphasizing law, abstract logic, the formation of policy statements, and employing altogether implausible hypothetical examples, contemporary rights-based moral and political philosophers, it would be argued, are no longer grounded in the real hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, ideas, and attitudes of flesh-and-blood human beings. Since the time of Descartes, Western philosophers have increasingly abstracted a purely cognizing activity away from concrete persons and determined that this use of logical reasoning in a disembodied "mind" is the choosing, autonomous essence of individuals, which is philosophically more foundational than are actual persons; the latter being only contingently who they are, and therefore of no great philosophical importance.³⁰

The uncritical commitment to a Leibnizian rationalism in its various forms rehearsed by Rosemont here, is in fact one bit of faulty reasoning so recalcitrant and so persistently exercised by the philosophical elite that John Dewey, one of the earliest thinkers to be consistently critical of this

particular *deformation professionnelle*, dubbed it “*the philosophical fallacy*.” Simply put, *the philosophical fallacy* is committed whenever the outcome of a process is presumed to be antecedent to that process—whenever some ostensive “principle” is identified, isolated, and abstracted from the flow of experience and is then used anachronistically and reduplicatively to rationalize an always-emergent history. Dewey from early on saw as “the most pervasive fallacy of philosophical thinking” the error of ignoring the historical, developmental, and contextualizing aspects of experience. The methodological problem as he saw it is “the abstracting of some one element from the organism which gives it meaning, and setting it up as absolute” and then proceeding to revere this one element “as the cause and ground of all reality and knowledge.”³¹

Notable examples of this fallacy are the Empiricist assumption that bare sense data are the beginning points of knowledge rather than mere abstractions constructed from the wholeness of primitive feelings, or the Rationalist prejudice that the coherence and stability won from the control of the precarious aspects of existence are the ground rather than the outcome of human practices, as when a divinely ordered cosmos is presumed to be the model for human personal and social order rather than the reverse. Suffice to say that *the philosophical fallacy* exists anytime the *terminus ad quem* is placed before the *terminus a quo*. Why, pondered the curious tourist, were so many American Civil War battles fought in national parks?

In fact, we philosophers are urged by the responsibilities of our office to warn against all fallacious forms of reasoning. But like the preacher who, come Monday, commits the very sins he railed against the day before, we are ourselves rarely delivered from the idols of the mind. Sometimes the fallacy is overlooked by polite conspiracy—as when we allow the author of this book to call the last pages written the “Preface,” or when we give the name “Pre-Socratic philosophers” to those early Greek thinkers who in some seemingly ineluctable way anticipated the questions that would preoccupy the agora’s barefoot philosopher. In such cases, the fallacy seems both innocent and harmless.

Moreover, given the extreme difficulty of avoiding this fallacious bit of reasoning in which we anachronistically take the outcome of experience to be its antecedent, we may be justified in often overlooking it, for as William James quoting Kierkegaard insists: “We live forwards ...

but we understand backwards."³² And in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, the White Queen says to Alice: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." Jorge Luis Borges too worries over how the outcome of experience is always present in our understanding of the past when he concludes that "life is essentially anachronistic."

As on almost every other issue, of course, philosophers are likely to disagree as to precisely when the conditions leading to the commission of *the* philosophical fallacy obtain. A strong ontological disposition, sustained by a distinction between the orders of knowing and of being, will suggest that it is always appropriate to place Being before those beings of the world through which Being itself is made manifest. The teleologist might find in some "far off Divine event" the ground as well as the goal of understanding, or perhaps anticipate the perfectibility of the "ready-made" human being in the actualization of a given potential.

One of the more pernicious of the many instances of *the* philosophical fallacy involves the kind of anachronism that reads history narrowly backwards from a given theoretical construct, finding at the origins of a historical narrative what in fact is merely one of the reflective fruits of that narrative. Such are the prejudices of teleological historiographies: Marxist, Hegelian, Christian, and indeed scientific. And corollary to this reading of history backwards is the myth that history "can be read sideways."³³ That is to say, there is a belief as widespread as it is mistaken that institutions such as the family, for example, have developed the same the world over. Since we assume that the family as an institution in our own experience has gone from being more oppressive to more liberating, we can thus learn about the evolution of the Western family by studying its more "primitive" antecedents elsewhere on the globe. Such is Marcel Mauss's understanding of the hard-won construction of the sacred Enlightenment person (*personne*) in its relation to other traditional conceptions of person:

From a simple masquerade to the mask, from a "role" (*personage*) to a "person" (*personne*), to a name, to an individual; from the latter to a being possessing metaphysical and moral value; from a moral consciousness to a sacred being; from the latter to a fundamental form of thought and action—the course is accomplished.... It is formulated only for us, among us. Even its moral strength—the sacred character of the human "person" (*personne*)—is questioned, not only throughout the Orient, which has not

yet attained the level of our sciences, but even in the countries where this principle was discovered. We have great possessions to defend. With us the idea could disappear.³⁴

Such Enlightenment thinking tends to condescend in seeing other strategies for organizing the human experience as proto- or pre-rational, thus in effect taking “traditional” to mean at best “pre-enlightened,” and at worst, “unenlightened.”

These are not only the more damaging forms taken by *the* philosophical fallacy, they are also the most difficult to avoid. After all, if one is to achieve any coherence in the construction of a historical narrative, one must appeal to some pattern of meanings, where the presumption of natural necessity can elevate that abstracted pattern to be the putative object of systematic knowledge. In any event, what Dewey saw long ago as *the* philosophical fallacy has become the philosophical issue of our day. An internal critique continues to be waged against *the* philosophical fallacy within professional Western philosophy under the many banners of hermeneutics, existentialism, post-structuralism, phenomenology, post-modernism, neo-pragmatism, neo-Marxism, deconstructionism, feminist philosophy and so on, taking as a shared target what Robert Solomon has called “the transcendental pretense”—*the* philosophical fallacy variously expressed as theo-ontological thinking, idealism, essentialism, formalism, objectivism, foundationalism, structuralism, transcendentalism, absolutism, logocentrism, the master narrative, the Myth of the Given, and all such foundational appeals on the carousel of systematic philosophies.³⁵

A “Depreciated” Confucianism

As we will find in the exploration of Confucian role ethics that follows, the Confucian vision of the consummate life has its own limitations, but *the* philosophical fallacy—the rationalization of the ethical life by appeal to antecedent moral principles—is not one among them. As first observed by Leibniz so long ago, rather than looking to Confucianism for abstract ethical theory, our appreciation of Confucian China might be better focused on its capacity to inspire the daily lives of the people, and in so doing, to realize a religiousness “in a vast multitude of men”

that is of a quality greater "than the founders of religious orders among us have achieved."³⁶ For Leibniz, Confucianism's potential contribution to world culture lies in the various symbiotic areas of civil philosophy: ethics, social and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion.

But an uncritical advocacy of Confucianism in and of itself is not what will be offered in these pages. We all know that the stock value of Confucianism has risen and fallen across its long career, and has just as often been depreciated as appreciated by its erstwhile adherents. In the broadest terms, we can argue that Chinese history has never (and probably never will) live up to the lofty vision laid down in the canonical Confucian texts. Confucius himself during his lifetime despaired at having yet to meet "anyone who is truly fond of consummate conduct" (*ren* 仁) or "anyone who is truly steadfast" (*gang* 剛),³⁷ and it is unlikely that many consummate and steadfast persons who have reached Confucius's high expectations have lived in the interim.³⁸

Internally, Confucianism has all too often been appropriated by the powers-that-be to reinforce class and gender inequities. More than a fair share of despotic rulers have ruled imperial China over the centuries and have oppressed generations in the name of Confucian values. And in Chinese homes, patriarchy has often reduced the complex notion of "family reverence" (*xiao* 孝) to blind obedience and unquestioning loyalty to adult males. Indeed, such a depreciation of Confucianism continues today. In our own times, it has been depreciated from within when a patriarchal and patronizing Singapore government manages to transform this living Confucian tradition into a dry-as-bones catechism—a form of political indoctrination to be foisted upon witless school children for their ostensive moral edification.³⁹

Confucianism has also been depreciated from without as, in the process of being introduced into the Western academy, its key philosophical vocabulary and terms of art have been overwritten with the values of an Abrahamic religiousness not its own, thereby reducing Confucianism in the eyes of many to a necessarily anemic, second-rate form of Christianity. Witness the standard formula of translations: *tian* 天 is "Heaven," *li* 禮 is "ritual," *yi* 義 is "righteousness," *dao* 道 is "the Way," *ren* 仁 is "benevolence," *de* 德 is "virtue," *xiao* 孝 is "filial piety," and so on. In sum, such a vocabulary conjures forth a pre-established, single-ordered and divinely sanctioned cosmos guided by the hand of a

righteous God that ought to inspire human faith and compliance.

There have been subsequent efforts by some scholars to rescue an uprooted and transplanted Confucianism from this Christian soil. But the result has often been to reconstruct its ideas and values through the prism of an Orientalism that would ostensibly save the integrity of Confucianism by dismissing its profoundly religious dimensions, and in so doing, reduce it to a kind of secular humanism. Or perhaps worse, in reading Confucianism's inclusive and provisional approach to philosophical understanding as unstructured and indeterminate, such interpreters are given to reducing its holistic sensibilities to mysticism and the occult.

The consequence, then, of this overtly Christianized and then Orientalized reading of the Confucian vocabulary has located the study of this tradition within Western seats of higher learning in religion and area studies departments rather than as a proper part of the philosophy curriculum, and has relegated translations of the Confucian texts to the "New Age" and suspect "Eastern Religions" corners of our bookstores. In attempting to provide a more nuanced explanation of these same Confucian terms, Qian Mu is adamant that this vocabulary expressing the unique and complex Confucianism vision of a consummate life simply has no counterpart in other languages.⁴⁰ Qian Mu's point in making this claim is not to argue for cultural purism and incommensurability; on the contrary, he would allow that with sufficient exposition (the ambitious objective of this present monograph), the Confucian world can be "appreciated" in important degree by those from without. Qian Mu's claim is on behalf of the uniqueness and the value of a tradition that has defined its own terms of art through the lived experience of its people over millennia, and anticipates the real difficulty we must face in attempting to capture its complex and organically related vocabulary in other languages without substantial qualification and explanation.

The Necessity of Informed Generalizations in Making Cultural Comparisons

Confucianism is further being depreciated today from another rather unlikely source—that is, from earnest interpreters of this tradition, some of whom are as committed to the enduring value of Confucian