1

Introduction

Within the four seas, all are brothers.

– Zixia

I am a human, and nothing human is alien to me.

– Terence

I. METHODOLOGY

I.A. Brief Description

There is often discussion of whether the teachings of the Chinese "masters" (zǐ 子) are "really philosophy."[1] This is a contentious issue because resolving it depends on deciding what philosophy is in general. I hope in this book to sidestep these issues by stating that I plan to examine the teachings of Kongzi ("Confucius"), the early Mohists, and Mengzi ("Mencius") from a particular sort of philosophical perspective. One can examine almost any text from a philosophical perspective, whether or not one regards that text as "genuinely philosophical." Of course, applying a philosophical perspective to a text may be more or less fruitful. And there may be disagreement over whether the results *have* been fruitful. For example, most contemporary philosophers seem to think that – although they are crucial background reading for anyone interested in Greek cosmology – the writings of Hesiod yield little when examined philosophically, but a few think that asking certain philosophical

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[1] See, for example, Hatton, "Chinese Philosophy or 'Philosophy'?"; Eno, *Confucian Creation of Heaven*, pp. 1–13; Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, pp. 313–36; Solomon, "What Is Philosophy?"; Defoort, "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy?"

questions reveals important aspects of Hesiod's writings.[2] I believe that we can learn much through applying a philosophical perspective to the Chinese "masters."

Philosophers use specialized terminologies and are concerned with specialized issues. Scholars from other intellectual disciplines (social history, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, etc.) may approach the same texts from other perspectives – which can be equally worthwhile. In fact, other philosophers would employ different terminologies and focus on different issues.

The particular sort of philosophical perspective that I shall employ has two features: it is, for want of a better term, "analytic," and it appeals to "virtue ethics" to help illuminate Ruism ("Confucianism"). "Virtue ethics" is a phrase well known to Western ethicians. I discuss virtue ethics in more detail in §II, but, briefly, virtue ethics focuses on what sort of person one should be, and what way of life one should live. Although it is not a Chinese term, I think that Ruism counts as a form of virtue ethics – but a kind of virtue ethics different in many respects from the forms of virtue ethics that have been dominant in the West. These differences have the potential to challenge us and contribute to ongoing philosophical debates by making us aware of new conceptions of the virtues and of ways of living a worthwhile life. (I discuss the potential contribution of Ruism to contemporary ethics in Chapter 5, §II–III.) Furthermore, I believe that applying the vocabulary of virtue ethics illuminates many interesting aspects of Ruism that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The distinction in Western philosophy between "analytic" and "non-analytic" philosophies is not a sharp one. However, what I mean in saying that I am employing an analytic philosophical perspective is that I am especially concerned with the following: finding, interpreting, and evaluating arguments in the texts; clarifying the meaning of the texts by spelling out interpretive alternatives and examining whether some make better sense of the text than others; and exploring whether each text is self-consistent.

An "analytic" methodology may seem disturbingly unfamiliar to scholars working in other intellectual disciplines for at least three reasons. First, some Sinologists are deeply influenced by "postmodernism" (as

[2] The common view is evident in Kirk et al., *Presocratic Philosophers* (although even here it is acknowledged that Hesiod is more systematic and critical than Homer [pp. 7, 34]). On the other hand, Mitchell H. Miller finds more value in a philosophical approach to Hesiod ("Implicit Logic of Hesiod's Cosmogony," especially pp. 131–32). See also Miller, "'First of All': On the Semantics and Ethics of Hesiod's Cosmogony."

evident in, for example, Bernard Faure's *Chan Insights and Oversights*).
"Postmodernism" is another loose and only sometimes helpful label.
The term has been in use since the early twentieth century and is used by
different thinkers in different ways in different intellectual disciplines.
However, one of the most influential characterizations was given by Jean-
François Lyotard, who described it as "incredulity toward metanarra-
tives."[3] I take him to mean the following. A narrative is any account or
story, such as evolutionary theory. A metanarrative is a story about why a
particular narrative is justified, or why we ought to believe it. For exam-
ple, a metanarrative might say that scientific theories (such as evolution)
are objectively true because they frame hypotheses that are unbiased by
considerations of politics or personality and are based on only what is
directly observable. Now, many philosophers and historians of science
would reject the particular metanarrative I just sketched. We now know
that there are no pure observations; all observations are "theory-laden."
In addition, psychological and sociological factors bias scientific results
to a great degree.[4] However, postmodernism's "incredulity toward meta-
narratives" means not believing that *any* metanarrative is justified. In
other words, one does not regard as objectively warranted any claims to
truth.

Postmodernists and "analytic" philosophers often find themselves in
opposition.[5] Personally, I think that the best postmodern philosophy and
the best analytic philosophy are both interesting and important and that
they can be brought into a fruitful dialogue. But my style is more analytic
than postmodern, and this will grate on some of my readers. Nonethe-
less, I do not think that anything I have written or assumed in this book
has to be rejected by a postmodernist. I do not assume that a text has one
unique meaning, or that its meaning is transparent, or that its meaning
is determined by authorial intent, or that its meaning is timeless, or that
an interpretation can be proven to be true with Cartesian certainty. (I
would agree with postmodernists in rejecting each of these assumptions.)
I assume only that, for a particular intellectual context in which an inter-
preter (such as myself) is writing, with a particular intellectual agenda
(understanding texts both in their contexts of production as well as how
they functioned for later interpretive communities), there are better and

[3] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 482.
[4] See, for example, Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Pickering, *Constructing Quarks*,
Waller, *Einstein's Luck*, and Hooper, *Of Moths and Men*.
[5] For some samples of the debate, see Carnap, "Elimination of Metaphysics," Derrida,
Limited, Inc., and Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*.

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worse readings of those texts, and that one can argue (using the particu-
lar intellectual standards of one's community) for the strength of some
interpretations over others. I think this is a fairly modest hermeneutic
principle.

A second aspect of an analytic methodology (especially when it is
applied to historical works) is for the focus of attention to narrow down
to the meaning of brief portions of the text (even down to individual
sentences or words). However, for many Sinologists the paradigms are
works that cover a wider scope, such as Mark Lewis's *Sanctioned Violence
in Early China*, or Lionel Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism*. Of course,
a narrow focus of interpretation runs the danger of missing the larger
interpretive picture. However, there is also the opposite danger of build-
ing a broad view on specifics that have not been well established.[6] Fur-
thermore, the close reading of a text is a well-established methodology
not just in analytic thought, but in many interpretive traditions, includ-
ing the natively Chinese "Evidential Research" movement Kǎozhèng zhī
xué (考證之學).

A third aspect of my approach that may be off-putting to some readers is
that I am largely employing a "hermeneutic of restoration" rather than a
"hermeneutic of suspicion." Paul Ricoeur coined these terms to describe
two broad trends in interpretation.[7] When employing a hermeneutic of
suspicion, one seeks to understand a text by finding ulterior motives or
causes for the composition of the text that are unrelated to any justifi-
cation for the truth claims made by the text. Such a hermeneutic tries
to "unmask" the pretensions of the text to truth and to get at its "real
motives." Ricoeur identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the "masters
of suspicion" (and now we might add Foucault to the list). For example,
in *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke claimed to be objectively inves-
tigating the basis of property rights and governmental authority. But in
actuality, a Marxist would say, he is expressing and promoting what is in
the interest of the bourgeoisie, the social class of which he is a member.
Similarly, the dialectical method of argumentation used by Socrates and
Plato is not, Nietzsche argues, a disinterested search for Truth and the
Good, but is instead a tool for exercising power over others with words
instead of with fists. In other words, texts lie, and the hermeneutic of

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[6] I would not say that this is true of either Lewis's or Jensen's works. But broad surveys
should, like theirs, be built out of solid details.
[7] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, pp. 28–36.

suspicion seeks to figure out why they lie. Generally, those who practice a hermeneutic of suspicion hold that authors are not themselves conscious of the true causes or motives that underlie the production of their texts. (Freud's notion of the subconscious is intended, in part, to explain how people can have and act out of motives of which they are not themselves aware.) However, Robert Eno is also using a hermeneutic of suspicion when he argues that the early Ruists were self-conscious about concocting philosophical arguments merely in order to get the patronage of rulers, so as to fund their ritual activities.[8]

In contrast, a hermeneutic of restoration is based on the expectation (or "faith" as Ricoeur also calls it) that the text addresses me, because language "is not so much spoken by men as spoken to men."[9] The text may be mistaken, but it does not "lie." The task of interpretation is to hear the message. Again, the message sought is only a message as I hear it now in my context, and even then it need not be a univocal message, but it is still a message, whose claim to truth challenges me and my view of the world, whatever that may be.

One way of understanding the distinction between hermeneutics of suspicion and restoration is to consider how they seek to answer the question, "Why does he believe that?" Suppose Arthur believes that spirit mediums can contact the dead and relay messages from them. A hermeneutic of restoration would examine what justifications he has for this belief. Arthur felt the table move during the séance. He saw some substance, which he believed to be "ectoplasm," emanate from the medium. The medium said things that his deceased son would have said. In the end, we may conclude that Arthur's beliefs are not justified. There are more plausible explanations for all of Arthur's observations than successful contact with "the spirit world." But as long as we are examining Arthur's beliefs in terms of their possible justifications (including their possible failures as justifications), we are using a hermeneutic of restoration. In contrast, we would be using a hermeneutic of suspicion if we said that Arthur believes in spirit mediums because he is grieving over the premature death of his son, so he wants desperately to believe that there is life after death and that he can still communicate with his son. Arthur's desire to contact his

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[8] Eno, *Confucian Creation of Heaven.* For a critique of this aspect of Eno's position, see Shun, Review of the *Confucian Creation of Heaven.* But there are still many valuable insights in Eno's book that are independent of his more controversial general thesis about Ruism.

[9] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy,* p. 29.

deceased son may be the *cause* for his belief, but it is unrelated to any *justification* for the truth of that belief.[10]

Those who prefer to approach historical texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion may find naive any project like my own. But I think different hermeneutic strategies can complement one another. To not see that, historically speaking, Ruism has frequently acted as an ideology that supports the interests of certain social classes is to be dangerously naive. But this does not rule out the possibility that Ruists have also had some insights into the human condition, that this partially accounts for the fact that Ruism has engaged brilliant minds in various cultures for more than two millennia, and that we might learn something ourselves from Ruist texts. Furthermore, the effort to employ only a hermeneutic of suspicion is incoherent. To read Marx and believe that he has accurately described the genesis of philosophical ideas is to read Marx himself with a hermeneutic of restoration. And if Marx is entitled to be read with a hermeneutic of restoration, then so is Locke.

Generally speaking, my plea here would be for methodological pluralism. There are a number of disciplines and methodologies that can be applied to texts in ways that are illuminating. This does not entail, of course, that just anything goes. If what we say has any content, it must rule some things out. However, one should not reject out of hand an "analytic" methodology (or any other approach) simply because it does not meet one's preconceptions about how texts are to be studied.

One of the most important commitments of a hermeneutic of restoration is "the principle of charity." In the Anglophone world, W. V. O. Quine brought this principle to prominence and gave it one of its most influential formulations: "one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation."[11] In other words, we weigh it against an interpretation if it attributes to someone a belief that we regard as not just false but absurdly so. Quine's student, Donald Davidson, fine-tuned the principle, noting that "disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement."[12] For example, I may find utterly absurd your belief that Linda is possessed by demons. However, for you and I to disagree about whether Linda's

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[10] My example is based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was, ironically, the creator of Sherlock Holmes (a literary paradigm of rationality) but also a firm believer in spiritualism. His attraction to spiritualism was, in fact, consequent upon the death of several of his close family members.

[11] Quine, *Word and Object*, §13, p. 59.

[12] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," p. 137.

aberrant behavior is caused by a chemical imbalance in her brain or by demonic possession, we have to agree about a large number of things: that Linda is a human being, that Linda's behavior is out of the ordinary, that we are in the room with Linda now, that she just spewed green slime on you, and so on.

Both Quine and Davidson stress the holism of meaning. As Davidson put it, "If sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, and we understand the meaning of each item in the structure only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which it features, then we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language."[13] So words have meaning because of the roles they play in sentences, and sentences have meaning because of the words that make them up. But this is only part of the holism. The meaning of a sentence also depends on the relationships between it and other sentences: what sentences does it seem to entail? What sentences does it seem to rule out? Furthermore, sentences have meaning not just in terms of other linguistic items, but in terms of the complete "form of life" of the community that uses them. What this entails is that our evidence for the interpretation of an individual word is that it makes the best sense out of the sentences in which that word occurs; our evidence for the interpretation of a sentence is that it makes sense of the role that sentence plays in the pattern of other sentences in the language, as well as what we know about the meanings of the individual words that make the sentence up; and our attributions of lexical and sentential meaning must make sense of the entire way of life – historical, physical, cultural – of the community we are studying.[14]

Richard Grandy has proposed a helpful modification of the principle of charity, which he labels the "principle of humanity." Grandy notes that, especially in cases where we attribute falsehoods to someone, we should place "heavy emphasis on the importance of taking into consideration the speaker's past history, both his verbal conditioning and his nonverbal stimulations."[15] In other words, we may legitimately attribute to people false beliefs – even beliefs that seem wildly false to us – if an understanding of their larger linguistic and social context explains how humans who

[13] Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," p. 22.

[14] In literary criticism and among non-analytic philosophers, Saussure's work is more commonly treated as the locus classicus of meaning holism (*Course in General Linguistics*). Not everyone subscribes to holism, though. For a sustained critique, see Fodor and LePore, *Holism.*

[15] Grandy, "Reference, Meaning, and Belief," p. 449.

are substantially like us could have held those beliefs in that context. For example, it is obvious to me that a dropped stone is pulled toward the Earth by an external force, gravity. However, an understanding of his linguistic, historical, and social context allows me to see why Thomas Aquinas thought such a stone is self-moving, impelled by a sort of "love" to move toward its natural location in absolute space. So the "principle of humanity" says that the errors we attribute to those we interpret must be explicable as errors that our fellow human beings could plausibly make.

It is crucial to understand the principles of charity, humanity, and holism.[16] But it is equally crucial to see what they do not entail. For example, holism does not entail that individual "pieces" of textual evidence do not matter or that they may be handled carelessly. A holistic interpretation of a text in its historical context must explain in detail (1) how it interprets particular words and sentences in a plausible manner; (2) how it handles passages that seem, prima facie, difficult for it to account for; and (3) why it does so better than the best alternative interpretations. The situation seems parallel with that in natural science. It is a commonplace now that there are no pure observations that ground science; every observation is "theory-laden." In addition, theoretical concepts are related holistically.[17] These natural scientific facts are analogous to the hermeneutic facts that meaning is holistic and that we cannot "ground" an interpretation in words and sentences that come to us with absolute meanings. But, in the case of natural science, these facts do not mean that a scientific theory cannot be seriously challenged by (comparatively) observational evidence. Likewise, in hermeneutics, an overall interpretation can be challenged if it does not have explanations of numerous pieces of the text or if it has explanations that seem forced and convoluted.

Furthermore, it is not a legitimate application of either the "principle of charity" or the "principle of humanity" to reject an interpretation simply on the grounds that it attributes to a philosopher a view that *we* regard as mistaken. Most philosophers disagree with each other about

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[16] The insights of Quine, Davidson, Grandy, and others were reached independently by those in the Hermeneutic tradition (such as Hans-Georg Gadamer) who formulated them in terms of the "hermeneutic circle." See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, especially pp. 265–307. For a helpful introduction to Gadamer's thought, see Part 3 of Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism.*

[17] See, for example, Duhem, *Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

most philosophical issues, so most of us are mistaken about these issues. For example, I think Hume's empiricism and his ethical antirealism are both wildly false, and his arguments for each are quite mistaken. But I can hardly argue that Hume could not possibly have *believed* in empiricism merely because I think he was wrong to do so. Charity and humanity rule out only inexplicable or massive error.

I.B. Three Objections

But even if one grants me my methodology, one may wonder whether I have applied it in a way that illuminates, rather than distorts, the texts I am interpreting. It should go without saying (although sometimes it does not) that it is not a sufficient objection to merely *accuse* another scholar of projecting an alien conceptual scheme onto a text. As Kwong-loi Shun observes,

> The mere fact that an account of an early Chinese thinker's views goes beyond the relevant text does not by itself render the account problematic. To the extent that the account is more than a reorganization of the text, it will discuss the thinker's views in a contemporary language that already embodies conceptual apparatus alien to the early thinker. Furthermore, to help us understand the thinker's views, the account presumably presents such views with more clarity than the original text and draws connections between ideas where such connections are not explicit.[18]

In other words, anything that goes beyond the most banal and unhelpful paraphrase of the text projects a conceptual scheme onto it. As Hans-Georg Gadamer put it, "A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting."[19] At the same time, a given conceptual scheme can be more or less faithful to a text. And one must substantiate an interpretation (or an objection to an interpretation) with specific textual evidence. The more evidence, the more convincing one's case.

Of course, one might also object to my approach on more specific grounds. Elsewhere, I have sketched what I take to be some of the major approaches to the study of Chinese philosophy today.[20] Based on my earlier typology, I imagine three major lines of objection to my approach.

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[18] Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, p. 9.
[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 267.
[20] Van Norden, "What Should Western Philosophy Learn from Chinese Philosophy?" and "America's Encounter with Confucian Thought."

I.B.1. Was There Argumentation in Ancient China?

Donald Munro influenced many interpreters with his insistence that the early Chinese masters were inept at philosophical argumentation and that "questions of truth and falsity were not" important to them. Munro adds that the "Chinese thinker's regrettable lack of attention to the logical validity of a philosophical tenet is balanced by his great concern with problems important to human life."[21] Angus Graham appears to be in agreement with Munro when he says of early Chinese philosophers that "the crucial question for all of them is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the Way?', the way to order the state and conduct personal life."[22] Graham emphasized another important difference between Western and Chinese philosophy: formal logic was never discovered in China. We do find, in the writings of the later Mohists, brilliant and fascinating discussions of issues in the philosophy of language and what we would call "dialectics," but the Mohists have a "lack of interest in establishing logical forms," and Graham suggests that their approach is not an investigation of syllogistic reasoning but "is much more like the argumentation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations* and Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of mind.*"[23]

Graham's general point is somewhat obscured by the fact that he does not restrict his use of the term "logic" to "formal logic." (Hence, one of his seminal books is entitled "Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science" despite the fact that he denies the Mohists or anyone else in China discovered *formal* logic.) Formal logic is concerned with patterns of premises and conclusions in which the truth of the premises would guarantee the truth of the conclusion, regardless of how the variables in the patterns are filled out. However, Western philosophers of language have recently come to recognize the importance of "opaque contexts," in which (paradoxically) substitution of a term with another term that refers to the very same thing does not result in a valid inference. For example, from "Lois Lane thinks Clark Kent is unattractive" we may not infer "Lois Lane thinks Superman is unattractive." Interestingly, the later Mohists seemed particularly concerned with opaque contexts and noticed that, if "Jill loves her brother" is true, and if her brother is a handsome man, it may nonetheless not be true that "Jill loves a handsome man" (since the latter

[21] Munro, *Concept of Man in Early China*, p. ix. Cf. ibid., p. 55. Interestingly, among Munro's students were Eno, who argues that Ruists are not serious about the arguments they produce, and Chad Hansen, who believes that the arguments of Ruists like Mengzi are "atrociously inept and unconvincing" (*Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, p. 188).

[22] Graham, *Disputers*, p. 3.

[23] Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, p. 44 (capitalization of titles *sic*).