The Eclipse of Classical Thought in China and the West

For centuries, the starting points for serious thought about ethics, justice, and government were traditions founded, in China by Confucius, and in the West by his near contemporary Socrates. In both classical traditions, norms were based on human nature; to contravene these norms was to deny part of one's humanity. The Chinese and Western philosophical traditions have often been regarded as mutually unintelligible. This book shows that the differences can only be understood by examining where they converge. It describes the role of these traditions in two political achievements: the formation of the constitutions of Song dynasty China and the American Republic. Both traditions went into eclipse for similar reasons but with quite different consequences: in China, the growth of absolutism, and in the West, the inability of modern political and ethical thought to defend the most fundamental values.

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To James Robert Gordley

My father, who was born on an eighty-acre pig farm in 1906, educated in a one room country schoolhouse, and never went to college, became a major executive of a Fortune 500 company. He was a smart man. One day I showed off the knowledge of moral philosophy I had acquired at the elite high school to which he was able to send me. “Dad,” I asked, “why is it wrong to rob a bank?” “Don’t you know that it is wrong to rob a bank?” “Of course, I do. But how do we know that it is wrong? How could you prove it?” “Don’t you know that it is wrong to rob a bank?” The conversation continued in this vein.

The next night he took me outdoors and pointed to the moon. “Is that beautiful?” “Yes, Dad, very beautiful?” “Why?” he asked me. I admitted that I did not know. “You see,” he said, “some things just are.” Fifty years later I understood why he was right.
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