

Degenerate Skepticism and the Thieves of Philosophy

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Entertaining what early Chinese philosophy might contribute to dialogues in contemporary ethics would, in better circumstances, be the task of many and entail generations of effort. Such is to say that the categories here contain too much: Both “early Chinese philosophy” and “contemporary ethics” are territories too vast to map out well in brief remarks. Moreover, concerted efforts to join the two in dialogue are too scarce to sustain many decisive claims. Far too few philosophers are acquainted with early Chinese philosophy, so what we have at present largely consists in a handful of specialists, who naturally have their own interests and priorities as philosophers, charged with speaking to and for the significance of a considerable, complex body of materials. Because of this, remarks about what early Chinese philosophy might add to contemporary debates can only be radically fragmentary and incomplete. When we advocate for greater acquaintance with Chinese philosophy among our non-specialist peers, we do well to keep this in mind, for in our outreach efforts, we often must put the cart before the horse.

Advocacy for greater attention to Chinese philosophy entails trying to motivate others to recognize its value by advancing our own conclusions about its rich possibilities. This is as it must be given our circumstances in the profession, but what it risks obscuring is that answering the question here – what early Chinese philosophy might add to contemporary inquiry – would most profit from simple open curiosity on the part of many. We specialists can inform others about what we find enlivening in the materials we study, we can advance what we particularly prize, but we cannot access the far more expansive value that might be found if more would simply bring to bear their own interests and preoccupations. To the extent that this far richer range of possibilities becomes obscured or muted by what we do here, our efforts may also risk eliding features of our present context that require attention, most significantly the skepticism in which our professional dialogues about non-western philosophies seat.

In venues like this, I think, we must ever emphasize the need for open intellectual curiosity on the part of many because it too often appears in woefully short supply, at least as our professional dialogues regarding “non-western” philosophies can provide measure. It remains disconcertingly and objectionably acceptable for those wholly unacquainted with Chinese and other “non-western” philosophies to dismiss their value and indeed to dismiss their status *as philosophy*. This is evident each time conversation in the profession turns, as

it episodically does, to discussing canon and curriculum. For then commences the predictable, tragicomic burlesque of the untrained and incurious pompously explaining to us, and to the profession at large, why materials they have neither read nor studied cannot, for reasons of philosophical *rigor* or high disciplinary *standards*, belong to philosophy.[1] I hope, albeit uncertainly, that the most outspoken and egregiously sneering participants in these debates are a minority within the discipline, but even if this is right, their effect is significant. For they render outreach efforts such as we undertake today haunted.

I take it as a given the profession's most skeptical and incurious gatekeepers are not here today. After all, their judgments regarding the worth of Chinese philosophy are, for them, comfortably, firmly settled: There is nothing we might say that they will discern a need to know. Despite their absence, however, their presence is nonetheless felt. Their ignorant, derisive commentary on our work and materials too easily steers our dialogue. Thus, for example, read any recent blog commentary on inclusivity and "non-western" traditions and one will find conversation devolving into importunate demands for *proof* that these traditions warrant attention and count as philosophy.[2] This endlessly repeated dynamic within the wider profession inevitably inflects our question today.

The invitation to remark upon what early Chinese philosophy might contribute to contemporary ethical discourse lodges within the cycle of skeptical professional dialogue on inclusion. This cycle skews my own attentions, inclining me to think more than I would wish about what might, *finally and at long last*, settle, or at least chip away at, cynical doubt. It moves me to think harder than I wish about what *they* might appreciate and be tempted to like, suffocating my own rich enjoyment of my materials by obliging me to strategically adopt their rather anhedonic skeptical resolve. So too, given how very few of us in the profession work on "non-western" philosophy, I am uncomfortably aware that status-anxiety can infect what we offer and how we present our work. Some of our peers would not grant us the status of philosophers – after all, for the most skeptical we are by definition in thrall to the fiction that Chinese philosophy *is* philosophy – so as we present our work, we have to prove not simply its worth, but our own. This is why I characterize efforts such as ours here today as *haunted*. We inhabit a profession that regularly supplies platform and willing audience to hostile incuriosity and sometimes rank bias. Nothing I can possibly say about the worth of Chinese philosophy will dispel the skepticism of the most vocal who play an outsized role in our professional dialogues. Still, considering our situation in the

profession awakens in me some Confucian-inspired metaphilosophical reflections. After all, our present situation is one the Confucians would have found regrettably familiar.

In considering the prospects and future of Chinese philosophy within the profession, my thoughts often turn to Confucius himself. The Confucius I have in mind is not the storied, dignified sage held in the amber of posthumous hagiography, but the perennially and abjectly disappointed advocate peripatetically wandering from state to state in search of willing ears and open minds. This Confucius knew all too well that when faced with someone indisposed toward learning, even the best tuition cannot help (e.g., *Analects* 7.8).[3] So, like this Confucius, perhaps we can sometimes turn truculent and confess impatient irritation. Confucius, after all, knew that there is little one can do with dried shit if one wants material with which to build (*Analects* 5.10). Such is to say that building a more inclusive profession cannot transpire where the material with which we most work, the dialogues given greatest play, are those dictated by the intractably skeptical. Even if we could move them toward greater toleration of our work, aiming for whatever stingy concessions they might allow sacrifices too much. In particular, it betrays philosophical ideals we ought protect. Here too, the Confucians are most useful.

The early Confucians were uncommonly committed to the worth of learning. They were, moreover, adamant about the need for rigorous study to ground reflection. Thus in one particularly entertaining passage in the *Analects*, Confucius is found upbraiding himself for having spent a whole day in thoughtful concentration, forgetting to eat or rest. “I got nothing out of it,” he insists, “and would have been better off devoting the time to learning” (*Analects* 15.31). Even for sage Confucius, thinking, if it be absent careful study and learning, was folly. In addition to study, the Confucians treated keeping good company as crucial to a person’s development. Xunzi is especially emphatic on this score, enjoining that we take care in the quality of our community, for whether we will or no, our dispositions will be enormously influenced by them. He describes a plant with roots that have a pleasant scent, noting that its scent will be altered by its conditions: “[I]f you soak it in foul water then the gentleman will not draw near it, and the common people will not wear it. This happens not because the original material is not fragrant, but rather because of what it is soaked in” (2-3).[4] Virtuous people take care in where they dwell, aware that they will learn and develop in accord with what they are “soaked in.” Most generally, the multiple, various, and emphatic injunctions regarding learning we find among early Confucians commit them to a set of governing values and ideals. And these values and ideals can be

profitably turned toward defending philosophy itself from that which presently undermines and corrupts our practice.

We are, in Xunzi's idiom, "soaked in" an indolent, degenerate form of skepticism in which exercises in doubt perversely unmoored from learning are treated as the philosopher's art. Too often professional dialogue appears to harness the philosopher's storied capacity to engage in stubborn, proof-seeking inquiry to close-minded rebuff of the unfamiliar, to dogmatically oppositional resistance to novelty. Among the sacrifices these dialogues exact are some of philosophy's keenest and most significant intellectual values: curiosity, open-mindedness, epistemic responsibility, and appreciation of genuine expertise. Without these values to ground skeptical engagement with others, the profession not only betrays deep philosophical ideals but also, not incidentally, abets a host of unexamined biases. Where judicious skepticism can encourage one to withhold assent where uncertain, it too often features not as a useful heuristic in inquiry but as a substitute for it. The philosopher, in this shamefully common present iteration, is but a hammer ever hunting nails. The philosophers most disposed in this way are, as I have already said, not available to our suasion, but they influence and infect the wider population in the discipline. They can, and I think sometimes do, function as what the early Confucians described as village worthies.

The village worthy is characterological type, a perniciously problematic creature who excels at mere seeming. Confucius describes him as a "thief of virtue" (*Analects* 17.13). Mengzi elaborates that village worthies are especially difficult to rebuke or censure for they superficially accord with "current customs" and thereby win approval (*Mengzi* 7B37).[5] Moreover, they are not easily shifted, for "they regard themselves as right." He cites remarks ascribed to Confucius that condemn the village worthy based on his power to seduce others into confusion. Confucius says, "I hate that which seems but is not. I hate weeds out of fear that they will be confused with grain sprouts. I hate cleverness out of fear that it will be confused with righteousness. I hate glibness out of fear that it will be confused with faithfulness[...] I hate the village worthies out of fear that they will be confused with those who have Virtue." The village worthy is, in short, a counterfeit of the virtuous person, someone who, consciously or not, manipulates the external signs of virtue to appear admirable and thereby secure others' esteem.

Part of what renders the village worthy a potent conceptual device is that unlike standard anglophone methods for framing discussion of virtue as cashed out against vice,

against an opposite, here we have a mechanism for discussing that which is unsettlingly close experiential kin to virtue. The village worthy, that is, will not appear vicious – indeed, his resemblance to the virtuous constitutes the threat he represents. For unlike the vicious, his adept simulation of something we ought admire can take us in, can tempt us into mistaking the fake for the real, impoverishment for abundance. He can lead others astray, inclining them to prize superficial trappings of virtue rather than the real thing. The potency of the village worthy as a conceptual instrument for discussing virtue is quite rich, but I want to adapt the Confucian discussion to focus instead on philosophy and philosophers.

Describing what qualities of mind or character constitute a *real* philosopher is an open question and, at any rate, there neither is, nor likely ever will be consensus on this. However, I struggle to imagine any plausible account of the philosopher that would not include the characteristics I reference above: curiosity, open-mindedness, epistemic responsibility, and appreciation of genuine expertise. However, when professional talk turns to what philosophy is and does, it is philosophy's critical consciousness that is most frequently invoked, its commitment not to indulge in unexamined assumptions and, in what has become a tired professional cliché, its bold readiness to *question anything*. So too, philosophers often pride themselves on the manner in which this consciousness is exercised, extolling the philosopher's plain-speaking agonism and readiness for intellectual combat. Philosophy, as David Chalmers ruefully suggests, can be mistaken for "Fight Club." [6] Whether conceptually assaying *the philosopher* or describing how philosophers conduct themselves, professional discourse gives most play and attention to an aggressively skeptical, critical consciousness, rarely addressing or even invoking the other values I raise. Perhaps because of this, too many in the profession – those I am ready to call philosophy's village worthies – appear to treat exercising this consciousness as exhaustive of their intellectual duties, to understand skeptical challenge as *all they need to do* as philosophers interacting with other philosophers.

Philosophy's village worthy is one who in effect selects out of the qualities that comprise *being a philosopher* just the most socially arresting, conspicuous, and obvious. Where one wants to display philosophical acumen to others, win approbation, or signal one's belonging to the tribe, the shortest and indeed easiest route is to skeptically assail. This owes in part to our profession's outsized attention to skeptical facility over other philosophical skills, but it also owes in part to the nature of such exercises relative to what

our other skills can afford. Skeptical exercises readily permit displays of cleverness, in the same way that demolition is easier than construction and far more fantastic to behold. One must simply find the weak joints and pound rather than undertake any more patiently laborious process, and, not incidentally, every philosophical structure will have some weak joints. Moreover, the tear down will summon attention in ways more prolonged, incremental, constructive work will not. Skeptical exercises afford spectacle and win attention; they draw the eye in ways that exercising other qualities will not and likely cannot.

The favor we assign exercises of skeptical consciousness in how we describe philosophy and how we behave suppresses adequate recognition of our quieter yet necessary skills. Consider, for example, how difficult it is to render exercises of curiosity visible. Being curious entails activities such as reading and study outside one's natural ken and compass. It may well not, and often will not, yield products quickly developed and thereby available for others to see. It is easier to display and render visible qualities such as open-mindedness, epistemic responsibility, and appreciation of genuine expertise. But how does one do this? Visibly enacting these values might entail making utterances that appear largely excised from the standard philosopher's repertoire. One may need, for example, to confess, "I don't know," "I may be wrong," or "I lack sufficient knowledge to draw a conclusion." Where combat is our style and "seeming smart" is extolled, such can amount to baring one's neck before the blade.[7] Where a skeptical, critical consciousness is esteemed as primary, exercising these quieter skills may read like failure. After all, to open-mindedly entertain the novel or to defer to the earned authority of the expert entails keeping skepticism in abeyance, holding one's critical fire. Thus it is not simply that these values are more difficult to discern in others, but that overemphasis on a skeptical, critical consciousness ill fits us for enacting or displaying them.

If we understand the philosopher to have great need of the quieter qualities I suggest, we have reason to despair of philosophy's village worthy, he who treats our purported charge to "question anything" as sanction to *assail* anything no matter how little he knows or understands it. Like the Confucian village worthy, his is but a glib, facile, and indolent simulacrum of what we ought to value. To agonistically "question anything" while bereft of these other values is but philosophical nihilism. However much it may resemble features we expect philosophers to evince, it is but a weed and we mistake it for grain at our peril. To practice philosophy well, we do indeed need measures of stubborn effort and

doubt, but our doubt must include self-doubt, uncertainty that we have learned and know enough, that we have adequately and well understood, that have heard and listened well. These species of doubt attach to our quieter values, but we are soaked in an atmosphere in which a cheap and juvenile doubt unmoored from them is what we most often see displayed and lauded. Moreover, because of this, we permit intellectual vice far more range than we ought.

The village worthy's indolent, degraded skepticism can and indeed has been exercised within the profession in ways that promote reflexive, unthinking acceptance of ideology and bias. Thus, in what for Asian philosophy specialists is all too familiar, we see, for example, philosophers claiming to have read some piece of our materials and found it wanting. They thereby perform their skeptical consciousness but in an unreasoning and intellectually irresponsible fashion. For me at least, upon seeing each new iteration of this phenomenon, I cannot but think of the US Senator who "refuted" global warming by holding up a snowball. Like this senator, the philosopher denying Asian materials the status of philosophy and proffering his glancing encounter with a fragmentary scrap of "evidence," is simply manipulating external signs of a commitment to evidence and justification to forward a conclusion he declines to genuinely examine. Like the senator, philosophy's village worthy is likely wholly unavailable to rational suasion. My concern with him, I emphasize, is what he does to the rest of us, to the profession at large.

My prevailing concern with philosophy's village worthy is the Confucian worry: that the village worthy operates as a corrupting influence on us all. Unchecked, he distorts our sense of what we ought do and what we ought prize. He is, in Confucius' idiom, a *thief of philosophy*. In our professional discussions, he hijacks inquiry, his aggressive displays of doubt both constraining the sorts of conversations we are permitted and discouraging the participation of many. He misleads the impressionable, inclining them to think that his uninformed pugilism and reflexive agonism are "smart" and ought be emulated. His gaudy self-indulgence in assailing others arrests our collective attention and swamps recognition of the subtle and quiet. And, perhaps worst, he purports to represent his activity as philosophy itself, as the best we can do and the sum total of our noble charge. We are, I think, so soaked in his pernicious influence that we rarely challenge him on this. I remain hopeful that he does not represent what most of us prize, but we nonetheless accept him far more than I, put plainly, can understand. Relative to those who populate philosophy's marginalized areas, he is rarely challenged in the way we are. No matter how openly,

egregiously, and thoroughly he violates our nobler ideals of our discipline, *his* status as *philosopher* is treated as beyond question.

Let me draw back from assaying the village worthy and his effect in order to acknowledge the performative tension in what I offer. My own remarks are more aggressive and agonistic than would well align with the nobler values I describe. I do aspire to living these values and thus do not typically excoriate peers as village worthies (or at least eschew doing so out loud). In explanation of my pugilism here, then, let me but offer my own exhaustion and disappointment: I am too weary and demoralized to be more generous.

After over 20 years in the profession, I tire of the sorts of activities we Asian specialists are obliged to undertake in outreach in a climate that habitually betrays deep philosophical values. I tire of trying to tell others why they ought credit what we do and consider it philosophy. I tire of being haunted by the village worthies the profession contentedly tolerates and declines to exorcise, all while many of my own specialist colleagues abandon the discipline for academic departments where they can expect far better. My exhaustion issues, most of all, from the abject futility of outreach that can only do its work where others *do theirs*. Where our non-specialist peers decline to read and study our materials or research, where they cannot summon sufficient curiosity to make their own investigations, telling them what they ought find valuable and useful in Chinese philosophy in venues like this is too often a fool's game. If our interlocutors are unpersuaded by what we offer – and the influence of the village worthy is such that they will be well primed for resistance – what then have we established regarding our core question today, the use and interest of Chinese philosophy? Nothing at all, I insist.

Assaying what Chinese philosophy might add to our collective understanding is never going to transpire by a handful of specialists doing a bit work in a setting like this. The value, interest, and insight of Chinese philosophy can no more be established by one panel's brief remarks than our colleagues down the hall talking Descartes are somehow, in defiance of all credulity and plain good sense, thereby validating the entire compass of western philosophy. That we marginalized sorts are implicitly and sometimes even explicitly expected to do just this – to *prove and legitimate* the *bona fides* of entire traditions – is, finally and at long last, too appalling for me. So, to the question at hand here on our panel – what can Chinese philosophy add to contemporary philosophy? – I say to my non-

specialist peers: Repudiate the profession's toleration of intellectual indolence, summon up our discipline's nobler qualities, and begin *looking for yourselves*.

Lest my condemnation of the profession's village worthies be mistaken for condemning a few bad actors, let me render explicit that I accuse the profession as a whole for the damage these worthies do us all and, most particularly, marginalized scholars such as those in my field. For where the village worthies among us ever cynically agitate against what they find unfamiliar but decline to investigate, they find too little resistance from their "mainstream" peers, from those they will at least credit as *fellow philosophers*. Quite the contrary, the entirety of our professional and intellectual structures operate as if the village worthy is correct, as if "non-western" philosophy is *not* philosophy, not worthy of your attention, not worth teaching your students, not worth securing hires in your departments, not worth publishing in the "best" journals or in your edited volumes. This is not all the doing of the village worthies, but it does sustain and nurture them. Whatever complex combination of history, tradition, and inertia produce the radical absence of any "non-western" philosophy from all but a vanishingly few of our professional structures, the result is that the village worthy has the implicit sanction and plentiful cover to engage in his cynical theatrics in confidence that the profession is structurally established to be on his side.

Let me conclude by abandoning even the modest shreds of optimism, generosity, and noble ideals I have herein invoked and be the cynical demolition artist my time in this profession has trained me to be and treats as acceptable. The contemporary profession has capitulated to an impoverished, juvenile simulacrum of philosophy itself. An edifice traditionally erected upon secure foundations of fine ideals including curiosity, open-mindedness, epistemic responsibility, and appreciation of genuine expertise now stands on the sloppy sands of degenerate skeptical self-indulgence. Worse, it often vainly congratulates itself for just this, treating incurious, ignorant assault on the unfamiliar as the fine art of "questioning anything." So let me emulate that lazy creature too many like to call a *philosopher* and agonistically importune: If I here overstate the case and exaggerate the indolent, incurious intellectual mire in which the profession is soaked, *prove it*. Offer me some evidence to believe otherwise, some reason to think the finer qualities of the philosopher I invoke still exist among philosophers. However, barring substantial change in both our dialogues and professional structures, I will be what the current profession would

have me be: a person exceptionally difficult to convince, one whose first and dominant impulse will be cynical refusal to believe.

NOTES

1. For multiple examples and discussion of this phenomenon, see Amy Olberding, "Philosophical Exclusion and Conversational Practices," forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West* and available on request.
2. For examples of this, see cited material above.
3. All citations from the *Analects* are from Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (NY: Balantine Books, 1997).
4. Eric L. Hutton, trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
5. Bryan W. Van Norden, trans. *Mengzi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2008).
6. David Chalmers, "Guidelines for Respectful, Constructive, and Inclusive Philosophical Discussion," available here: <http://consc.net/norms.html>
7. On the phenomenon of "seeming smart," see Eric Schwitzgebel, "On Being Good at Seeming Smart," available here: <http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.ca/2010/03/on-being-good-at-seeming-smart.html>