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Confucianism in the Perspective of Global Science—A Review of *Reconceptualizing Confucian Philosophy in the 21st Century*

Today, Confucianism appears as a pre-eminently philosophical approach to the human, which, though deeply rooted in an ancient history in Chinese-speaking lands, now also has the potential to become a global philosophy. In its prescription of a distinctively disciplined way of life, it parallels world religions. However, Confucianism makes no claim to revelation, and so potentially offers a *universalist* understanding of what it is to be a human being. The fact that the nature or meaning of embodied Confucian life also points to specific social and political structures—even though these may be subject to variation—further suggests that such a universalist anthropology could be one which potentially, though still anchored in philosophy, has concrete content. There are two main challenges to be faced, however. First, there is the need for a reconceptualization of Confucianism in order for it to function as a truly contemporary thought-form. Second, there is the need to discover ways in which the themes and concepts of Confucianism can meaningfully inform our contemporary social and political realities beyond the scope of Chinese language and history. However, these challenges have, in many ways, become less daunting in recent years. Today, there is a new openness for a transcultural, globally-oriented ethical thinking and presence which can foster stability in times of rapid and unpredictable change. And there is a new acceptance that such a practical philosophy, or philosophy of human practice, as a properly global phenomenon could have its origins in China.

Reconceptualizing Confucian Philosophy in the 21st Century (Springer and Higher Education Press, 2017) draws together 31 chapters in which questions of the continuing relevance of Confucian texts and ideas are extensively explored. The editor, Xinzhong Yao, defines “reconceptualization” as “a highly intellectual activity of creativity and originality.” It emerges “from a skilful combination of

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philosophical traditionality and continuity, as it has to make sense of the old and to draw on the past to enable new interpretations.” This is a hermeneutic of “transformation” which conforms with present scholarly understandings of the nature of Confucius’ own achievement as breathing “new spirit” into old forms, by “reconceptualizing and reinterpreting the ritual propriety (*li*) and music (*yue*) system of the Zhou dynasty into an innovative way of thinking, feeling and acting” (1–2).

This rich collection is divided into three parts. The first focuses on thematic foci, or “Confucian doctrines,” as a resource, the second on the capacity of Confucian concepts to generate new answers to perennial questions, while the third part takes on the important task of “reinterpreting Confucian moral values and norms, in the hope that the new way of being moral can be gained through the old forms” (3). With this multifaceted focus on a hermeneutic of creative transformation, the bar is set very high: *Reconceptualizing Confucian Philosophy* is a remarkably ambitious book. All long-term traditions have to be concerned with change within continuity. But there are reasons to think that this might be particularly challenging in the case of Confucianism. Religious traditions—which claim to be revealed—often draw upon firmly consolidated “creeds” or “statements of belief,” and long-established, authoritative practices to support continuity of identity. This extends their longevity but limits their universality. On the other hand, the relative absence of these factors in Confucianism may well generate particular problems in the “reconceptualization” of Confucianism as a living tradition. What Confucianism gains through its philosophical purity in terms of universality, it loses through that same philosophical purity in its capacity to regenerate as a tradition. Ancient texts may serve as the foci for a recognizable traditional discourse, but the transformative application of that discourse will require words and sets of words that resonate more deeply with the minds of modern human beings in the social and political realities of their day. In order to address the question of the potential reception of Confucianism as a global thought-form, it makes sense to examine it in the context of the Western historical experience of the emergence of a distinctively global philosophical tradition.

1 The Western Tradition

It is widely accepted that Chinese and Western philosophies operate with different assumptions and have markedly different histories. In a seminal article written in 1984, Roger Ames defined these differences in terms of a significant opposition between Chinese “polarism” and Western “dualism.” Ames writes:

The separateness implicit in *dualistic* explanations of relationships conduces to

an essentialistic interpretation of the world, a world of “things” characterized by discreteness, finality, closedness, determinateness, independence, a world in which one thing is related to the “other” extrinsically. By contrast, a *polar* explanation of relationships gives rise to an organismic interpretation of the world, a world of “processes” characterized by interconnectedness, interdependence, openness, mutuality, indeterminateness, complementarity, correlativity, coextensiveness, a world in which continuous processes are related to each other intrinsically.

Here, the Western approach is linked with a strong account of *creation*, so that we find “the radical separation between the transcendent and nondependent creative source, and the determinate and dependent object of its creation. The creative source does not require reference to its creature for explanation.” Ames states that “[t]his dualism, in many various forms, has been a prevailing force in the development of Western-style cosmogonies [...]” (Ames 1984, 40–41, my italics).

However, more recent work on the origins of the Western tradition paints a markedly different picture. The seemingly ubiquitous concept of creation as *creatio ex nihilo* (“creation from nothing”) is, in fact, relatively late. It is sketchily present in some late Jewish scriptural texts, and only genuinely comes to the fore in the mid-thirteenth century in the work of Thomas Aquinas (May 1994, 22–26). It was Aquinas who first developed a strong creationist metaphysics in which “being” contrasts with “nothingness” (as opposed to the earlier Greek contrast of “being” with “illusion”) (Kahn 1982, 8). Medieval Western thinkers were not so much concerned with creation as origin as they were with the createdness of the human person. Revelation disclosed the full meaning or *telos* of human life as moral, lived out in a world that is God’s creation (Burrell 1993, 7–26. See also Taylor 2007, 369–71).

Moreover, the key term “transcendent” (reflecting the binary of “transcendence” and “immanence” that describes the divine Creator) first occurs in 1839, when it was used to counter Spinozist pantheism which was associated in that period with the new reductive Newtonian science that seemed implicitly to deny the possibility of freedom (Zachhuber 2017). It was the accommodation of Newtonian science that led to the full flowering of Western “dualism.”

It is not the case, then, that Western “dualism” extends back to classical Greek cosmogony (whose Demiurge was understood to shape and form rather than to create “from nothing”). Rather, this “dualism” was a distinctly European thought-form intrinsic to Western soft and hard power during the modern age of industrial and military expansion. It was the product of a series of very specific events which marked the major divide between “modernity” and “pre-modernity” in Western history. A very early sign of the direction this would take came in a debate in 1526, when the early Protestant Reformer Ulrich Zwingli argued on

humanistic-scientific grounds that matter is always “circumscribed, limited and particular.” This had the implication that the body of Jesus in heaven could not be a glorified body of light, as tradition held it to be. Rather, for Zwingli, the body of Jesus must be entirely unchanged if it is to be a real body (Davies 2013, 183–84). What was distinctive here was Zwingli’s understanding that a conclusion arrived at through natural science could not simply be set aside, even on such a sensitive topic of religious authority. Accordingly, Zwingli sought to adapt Christianity to the new science. He argued dualistically, for instance, that human mind or spirit and the Holy Spirit are linked and that they both free us from materiality, in a way that anticipated Hegel’s highly influential Idealist programme. This would become the intellectual bedrock of the University of Berlin, founded in 1810 as the model of modern universities across the globe (Howard 2006, 130–211). In 1543, Copernicus published *De revolutionibus*, which removed heaven from the mediaeval maps, while Newtonian mechanistic science was established as orthodoxy in his *Principia* of 1687. With the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Charles Darwin set out a new authoritative evolutionary account of human development. In its later form as “Neo-Darwinism,” from the 1930s, the theory of evolution began to present natural selection as based on random genetic variation and the “survival of the fittest.” This was very influential not least because it appeared to match the dominant capitalist economic models of the day.

2 Global Science Today

A global thought-form will be the product of an advanced society which is sufficiently at ease both with cutting-edge technological advancement and with the most advanced scientific world-views. However contested it was at times, Western “dualism” can be said to have met the challenge of integrating the science of the day. Confucianism has little in common with that early modern Western science however. Confucianism is a thought-form, ancient in its origins, that engages decidedly with human reasoning and relationality, with otherness and morality, and with the kind of pragmatic freedom or “at homeness” that is distinctive to local and extended community. As we see in the pages of *Reconceptualizing Confucian Philosophy*, it is paramountly a thought-form which understands human beings to be moral decision-makers who are deeply “social participants” in the cosmos as well as “observers.” Questions concerning the contextualized practices and acts of morality are at the heart of the Confucian vision.

But progress in science is notoriously unpredictable. Around 1900, Max Planck had already published papers which suggested that Newton’s mechanical conception of the universe might be entirely wrong. Later research in quantum field theory would establish that the cosmos is, at its foundations, radically free

and structured in a way that makes both the complexity and particularity required for life inevitable. The world is first and foremost information (based on the “bit” or “binary digit”) which is exchanged. But the deep structural variables of the material universe, which were irrevocably set in a vanishingly small passage of time after the big bang, are such that information at the sub-atomic level is limited (rather than infinite) and highly interactive (Lloyd 2006, 44–62). It is this constant interactive exchange of information which constitutes reality at its fundamental level, while at the large scale or classical level, we see stable ‘things.’ As quantum mechanics proved itself powerfully robust as a theory of matter, it was thought, for decades, that these were simply two different, equally valid, perspectives on the world. But with quantum effects now being used to build super-computers (and, in China, to design new, unbreakable codes), as well as being extensively applied at the classical level in the biological sciences, quantum theory is well on its way to replacing Newtonianism as a framework for understanding the nature of our human belonging in the world (Stapp 2017). When we measure or “observe” quantum effects, our consciousness causes a collapse of the wave function, or quantum uncertainty, bringing about the release of “information” which constitutes the real. Here, we are both observer and participant. Moreover, human consciousness itself is increasingly understood as being a quantum “space”: It has been argued that the exceptional neural interconnectedness of the human brain (“the most complex system so far discovered anywhere in the universe” (Zeman 2009, 1) itself reproduces the underlying reality of quantum cosmology.¹ If the human mind can “see” the effects of quantum interconnectedness or “entanglement,” through advanced mathematical calculation at a level prior to the emergence of space and time (as is the case today), then it seems we belong very deeply in this cosmos. Through the scientific principle of “supervenience” (whereby the highest levels of conscious reality are built upon the earlier, more physical levels in a “ladder” effect), we can say that as living human beings, we too are interactive, complex and particular.

But in addition to quantum discoveries, a further critical new perspective on the human comes into view through contemporary neuroscience. Much of what we think of as mind actually occurs prior to consciousness: we become aware of what the brain is thinking only late on, when the decision-making capacities of consciousness may be called upon. Consciousness allows us to learn and, crucially, it also gives us the power of decision-making, by integrating conflicting activations in different parts of the brain.² This capacity to resolve what we shall think or do is vital for a creature with such a large and complex brain (Frith 2007).

¹ See Wendt (2015), for a review of this field.

² See Haggard (2017, 196–207), for a current review of this literature with respect to the act.

The point we need to note, however, is that this means the most fundamental system in us (the recently discovered “social cognition system,”) is also prior to consciousness. This is how one body recognises or gets to know another. It is the “default system” of the human body (Mars et al. 2012; Li et al. 2014). Evolution has prioritized our sociality as the “participatory sense-making” of the human other. It is by this system that one body engages with another so that “our brains and bodies are no longer isolated, but immersed in an environment with the other person, in which we become a coupled unit through a continuous moment-to-moment mutual adaptation of our own actions and the actions of the other” (Konvalinka and Roepstorff 2012, 2). These multiple reflex interactions occur at speeds well beyond what we can consciously perceive, but they communicate in the form of a densely interactive, informational exchange which conveys a sense of social bonding or “rapport” (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). As “complex, multi-layered, self-organizing,” the social cognition system sits within the early motor system, involving sets of mutual responses ranging from eye movement, facial expression, posture, and gesture to the synchrony of brain waves, breathing, and pulse. This is a powerful, harmonic system which is based on “alignment of behaviour,” including “synergies, co-ordination and phase attraction.”³

This reflex system of bodily exchange and communication, which includes empathy and emotion, as well as reflexivity and high levels of discernment or evaluation, is how we encounter the other person in their living complexity: through the full range of this “participatory sense-making.” But it is decidedly not a deliberative, self-aware, linguistic system. The network of words which constitute our advanced language are stored at a distance, in the neocortex, where each individual sound and shape has been internalized as the “semantic system” in the brain (Huth et al. 2016). In an important sense, advanced language stands outside the social cognition system and cannot control it from within as self-aware subjectivity (though we can switch it on or off through eye gaze). Neuroscience then shows the separation of the social cognition system, by which we shape community in proximity, from our advanced language and advanced linguistic consciousness. But it also tells us, importantly, that the foundation of our exuberant and robust subjectivity is not in fact immaterial “substance” or “spirit” but is rather the interconnected network of many thousands of arbitrary signs, as words and phrases, which are internalized in the human brain. Our wonderful, free consciousness somehow results from this uniquely human form of linguistic brain enhancement (Hurford 2004, Clark 2006 and 2011).

In order to understand what this means, we also have to consider contemporary

³ Di Paolo and de Jaegher (2012, 1); see also Schilbach et al. (2013).

evolutionary theory, a third scientific area which has undergone substantial revision. The powerful new theory of “niche construction” is central to the “extended evolutionary synthesis” which has replaced the “modern synthesis” of Neo-Darwinism (Odling-Smee et al. 2003). Life begins with the interaction of organism and environment, through movement, and natural selection first acts upon the organism moving in its environment in ways that allow it to be at home (or not). Natural selection acts only indirectly on genes (there is no one-to-one correspondence between behaviour and genes). Moreover, as human beings, our capacity to shape our niche in the world is heavily conditioned by our sociality. We have evolved to become an intensely altruistic species, since strong and resilient group cohesion has been essential to our survival (and so has been selected for). We can only make ourselves at home in this world when we do so together.

Evolutionary anthropology tells us that we survived in close-knit, altruistic groups of some tens or hundreds, for some two million years, and left very few indications of inter-human violence. And then, from the early Neolithic period, around 12,000 years ago, a notable change in the nature of our sociality occurred. The influence of agriculture led to townships and a significant growth in population size. Advanced tool manufacture and use prepared the brain for the words and syntax of more complex forms of language. Now we begin to see features appear that are characteristic of advanced linguistic consciousness: early mathematics, extended forms of ritual, full representations of the human face and, indeed, a new capacity to commit genocide (which requires the human other to be named as “non-human”) (Fuentes 2017, 127–62). Where there is advanced language, there is the power of choice—we choose our words—and so also the basis for decision-making, reasoning, and deliberative judgments.

Advanced linguistic consciousness is to no small degree the product of a complex brain which, by its very capacity, can struggle to make quick decisions in ways that can ultimately be evolutionarily disadvantageous. This relatively recent consciousness is a “global workspace” which is skilled at decision-making (Baars 1997). To make a decision is to reduce and control the complexity of the world. As a modern human being, I achieve scientific understanding by asking the right theoretical questions which reduce the world’s complexity, and I achieve practical understanding of what to do by filtering complex situational reality through the simplifying lens of my perceived, enlightened self-interest. The natural function of advanced consciousness is to control the complexity of the world and to make it manageable, in line with our intentions. Our brains treat the internalized material words which are the basis of our self-aware freedom as tools (Cartmill et al. 2012).

But a deeply human problem appears here: our advanced linguistic consciousness is the product both of our tool use and of our social cognition. At the heart of the latter are high-speed, interactive, informational exchanges which are an open-ended though strongly evaluative process. This does not, of course,

involve our conscious free decision-making, and it is a process that is wholly open to the —seemingly unlimited—complexity of live or “online” engagement with the human other. Any reduction of that openness would threaten to instrumentalize our relations with the other, and so mark the end of our robust, open-ended social bonding. The human bonding system, which grounds us in the world, is an ancient one which reflects an uncompromising option for the other. But evolutionary anthropology shows that there is a critical development in the Neolithic as the social cognition system (which can function with around 150 others) (Dunbar 1996) is swamped by the population explosion which accompanied the shift to agriculture and townships.

With the rise of technology, advanced language (based on advanced tool manufacture and use), and population growth, there was an increase in social organization—but also an increase in systemic violence and a crisis in social cohesion. But this same time also saw the rise of ritual, religion, and the arts. As harmonic systems, these can be taken to be the external and cultural performance of the internal and biological reality of the human social cognition system. These allow the projection of its power into the new social spaces opening up between people. Moreover, what these all have in common is an emphasis upon the material nature of the sign.

If the internalized materiality of words—like social tools—sets us free to think and decide, then they also set us free in other ways too. For instance, if we wish, we can foreground the materiality of words themselves and so, in this way, freely celebrate the materiality we are as embodied consciousness. Music, chant, dance and (with the advent of writing) calligraphy and cantillation, all become enhanced forms of social bonding in extended societies. Where the forms of words are evoked as well as the rhythms of speech, we can see an emphasis also upon the shared nature of the sign. We can think of the free celebration of the materiality of words as the closing of the distance between mind and body. It is the beginning of our being fully “at home” as mind in our body. This may be something that is further enhanced where religions impose imperatives such as the “Golden Rule” with its call to treat others as you would wish them to treat you. This is a universalist, or human, imperative of equality, compassion and respect, and it has the power to project the harmonic influence of the species-wide social cognition system, with its open-ended and hospitable option for the other, into larger-scale societies. We can view this as a mechanism which invites our advanced linguistic consciousness to reason socially, for and with the other, on a much larger scale, counterbalancing its tendency only to instrumentalize and reduce complexity through deliberative judgment. The person who can accept the complexity of the human other can reason in ways which bring about a powerful convergence of mind and body in our primary sociality, and it is this unity which is arguably highly productive of extended community.

It may be that in the Neolithic, a new kind of human niche construction became necessary and possible: one which allowed us to be “at home” in our own embodiment, through the foregrounding of shared and internalized linguistic signs. This then laid the foundation for an enhanced capacity for constructing the human niche, though it would prove to be one which critically depended upon maintaining a balance between *homo faber* and *homo socius*: our power of technology and our power of non-instrumental social bonding.

3 Modernizing Confucianism

In the chapter “Can Confucianism Modernize? An Essay on Philosophical Possibility,” Zhao Tingyang sets out the parameters for the modernization of Confucianism as a universalist ethics. As a universalist thought-form, Confucianism appears relatively weak in its “theoretical capacity,” being closely tied to specific social contexts. But Zhao counters Fei Xiaotong’s claim that this is an irreparable “Confucian paradox” by emphasizing the capacity of our family relations to shape all other relations (51). A renewed Confucianism, however, will need to recognize the challenge of how the “endless” heart (oriented through *ren*) can overcome the boundary of the human body concerned with self-interest. Zhao believes that a modernised Confucianism will need to establish “a framework of universal knowledge” by which critical reason or the “theoretical capacity,” will effectively play the regulative role of “Outer Kingliness” in support of our “Inner Sageliness” (55–56).

But the question arises of what the basis of such a “universal knowledge” could be. In his ground-breaking transition from phenomenology to hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur lamented the incapacity of critical philosophy to engage human sociality at its most fundamental point in the “face to face.” Critical philosophy needs structure and the “face to face” is too immediate to us for any structure to come into view. Therefore, Ricoeur advocated the turn of hermeneutical philosophy to texts, where—at a distance from the interfacial—a subject-text structure begins to emerge (Davies 2016, 100–01).⁴ Arguably, however, recent findings in the neuroscience of social cognition allow us now to discern an original structure in the “face to face.” This in turn may allow us to begin to build a critical philosophy which includes this most fundamental dimension of ourselves. The combination of the recent science of human sociality with traditional Confucian themes would be a significant resource for building new critical, ethical, and ontological categories. These may potentially have global political resonance by virtue of being grounded

⁴ For Ricoeur’s text, see Ricoeur (1975).

in, and the expression of, our species-wide social cognition system.

A second and related topic concerns the Confucian theme of the relation between cosmos and self: that is the “world” or “heaven” to which we dynamically belong. This too takes on contemporary political significance in Xinzhong Yao’s chapter concerning sustainability: “The Confucian Aspiration at the Heart of *Tianren Heyi*: Eco-centrism, Anthropocentrism and the Anthrocosmic Relationship in Traditional Confucian Thought.” Here, the active debate concerning the ontology of the human social cognition system has particular relevance. This can be viewed from the perspective of inferential theory (by which I infer the existence of the immaterial other from material causes), or simulation theory (whereby I reconstruct the immaterial other by analogy with my own self-experience). But the social cognition system also needs to be viewed from a third perspective which is that the primary knowledge that comes to us of the other is prior to any such secondary reflection and is *already given* with the action of the other. Shaun Gallagher states the “enactivist” principle in these terms:

When I see the other’s action or gesture, I see (I *immediately perceive*) the meaning in the action or gesture; and when I am in a process of interacting with the other, my own actions and reactions help to constitute that meaning. I not only see, but I resonate with (or against), and react to the joy or the anger, or the intention that is in the face or in the posture or in the gesture or action of the other. (Gallagher 2008, 449)

The influential “enactivist” school of social neuroscience understands our most fundamental cognition to be social and “self-organizing” as a system, in a way that includes our reciprocal difference or “polarism” but not yet the separateness that we associate with “dualist” mental constructs such as inference or simulation (Mars et al. 2012; Li et al. 2014). In other words, the “in-between” social cognition system is inseparable from “world.” We are pre-thematically already wholly in the world, and at home in the world, as embodied social *participants*, while also standing outside the world as scientific observer. In a cosmos which we understand as information, our “deep” sociality means that we are pre-thematically absorbed in interrelational processes of informational exchange in which we ourselves *are* information: we ourselves *are* world. It is here that the roots of an enhanced “theoretical capacity” may lie, based in a “relational rationality” which is extended in its actualization by the cultural power of science.⁵

And so we come to the final question of whether this new science of human sociality can cast light specifically on the inclusivity but also on the universality of

⁵ This second term is taken from the discussion of *Tian Xia* in Zhao (2015).

the *Tian Xia* or “all under heaven” of Chinese tradition. If we do indeed see an adaptation of the social cognition system from the early Neolithic, with its foregrounding of the materiality of the advanced linguistic sign and suspension of the tool-like function of reference, then why should we not understand the celebratory extravagance of Chinese characters to be a further adaptation manifesting within the very distinctive conditions of Chinese history and identity?⁶ Within language groups, we share the materiality of signs at a deeper level than we do the concepts they communicate. The parallel programming of the human brain, with the long-term internalization through repetition of complex characters (effecting a material change in the brain), may in the case of Chinese culture lead to the formation of an “internal boundary” of harmonic relatedness. The idea of “One China” may be the external political expression of that internalized material-linguistic boundary. But can it escape the limits or “borders” imposed by the particularities of the Chinese language?

At its high-point, Western rationalism liked to define itself in terms of a universal scientific knowledge generated by the mind’s triumph over the limits of material context imposed by language (from Locke to Kant of the three critiques, from Hegel to Husserl, Frege and even Daniel Dennett—Karl Marx is a notable exception) (Davies 2015, 252–57). It was committed to the view that language is truly immaterial. As we know, this was a highly influential movement, closely linked with dominant technologies and very much at ease with the science of the day. However, the rationalist belief in the immateriality of language was illusory: language remains material even when we persistently seek to free ourselves from matter by the power of thought. But even though there was a complete mismatch between what is, namely the materiality of the linguistic sign, and how language was represented in thought (i.e. by the conceptual content of the sign), Western rationalism would remain secure in its stronghold for centuries. A Chinese account of language which understands the materiality of the sign then should be able to close the gap between what is and how it is represented. It should be able to overcome the limits of its own particularity by understanding the extent to which the material properties of language are *shared between languages*.

For all its particularity, the Chinese *Tian Xia* nevertheless remains a theme which, in its inclusivity, harmony, and “relational reasoning,” corresponds very closely to the ancient social bonding system of the human body. A cultural tradition which is two and half thousand years old, must itself be drawing extensively upon it. The modern Western experience suggests then that even in its

⁶ Defoort (1998) points to a focus not so much on the content of words but on their “modes of expression” in Confucian texts. This argument is developed into a more comprehensive textual hermeneutic of indeterminacy in Confucian “naming” in her more recent “How to Name or not to Name: that is the Question in Early Chinese Philosophy” (see Ge 2017, 1–28).

particularity, Chinese language and culture can reflexively embody our shared *species-wide* communicative functions (or “informational exchange”) and that this may ultimately outweigh cultural difference in global contexts. It is thinkable that it can guarantee the capacity of Chinese culture to develop new ways of speaking and new kinds of communitarian, socio-economic practice, which can become the communicative medium of the human body itself, in the fuller presence of its innate sociality.

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